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VOICING WOMEN'S RESISTANCE WITHIN RELIGIOUS STUDIES:
AN INTERROGATION OF RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Anne E. Tedore
University of Northern Iowa
December 2006

ABSTRACT

While women are generally oppressed within hierarchical and patriarchal religious traditions, researchers continue to detail the ways women negotiate power and construct meaning in religion. Within this thesis I interrogate the use of rational choice theory, a prominent theory utilized to describe religious behavior, as a framework for the analysis of women's religious experience and agency. I compare two texts, Brenda Brasher's *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* and Jeanette Rodriguez's *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican-American Women*, in order to illustrate the inadequacies of rational choice theory in describing the religious experiences of marginalized women. I claim that rational choice theory does not articulate the relationships of power implicit within gender, does not describe embodied experience, and denies the cultural embeddedness of religion. I attribute the prominence of rational choice theory to a Protestant bias in the field of religious studies. The dominance of Protestant perspectives within the field of religious studies has mandated what can be considered religious, solidified institutional power, contributed to the marginalization of the oppressed, and rendered problematic the agency of many persons whose religious practices do not fit the Protestant mold. In an effort to transform the field of religious studies, in this thesis, I emphasize the importance of alternate readings of women's experience. Theories like rational choice that stress belief and focus on the individual's religious experience uncritically impose limiting religious ideology upon female subjects. Rather than rely on rational choice theory, researchers need to pursue

alternate explanations that demonstrate how women negotiate agency in their religious lives, resisting oppressive ideology and repressive religious practices.

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This Study by: Anne E. Tedore

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INTERROGATION OF RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: RELIGION, WOMEN, AND AGENCY

Faced with the ubiquitous male dominance of overall congregational life, fundamentalist women establish a parallel symbolic world in which they can be fully contributing participants. When women's ministries are considered along with the rest of what Mount Olive and Bay Chapel offered to women – intense religiosity, free child care, free counseling, readily available community, lively music, emotive singing, affordable continuing education and inexpensive weekend retreats – the decision that some women make to be actively involved with a Christian fundamentalist congregation can seem a fairly rational choice.

(Brenda Brasher *Godly Women* 27)

Although Our Lady of Guadalupe would not be considered a source of political activism, certainly she is a source of empowerment. What could be more empowering to a people who have been systematically and repeatedly negated than acceptance of their dignity and humanity? She offers that to her people, who are gifted, capable, and generous, yet who lack a sense of their own worth. Our Lady of Guadalupe looks into their hearts and souls and gives them value. Once they are accepted and embraced and loved, then they believe in themselves. It does not matter what they can or cannot do, who or what they are, where they come from, or even where they are going. They give glory to God just in being themselves.

(Jeanette Rodriguez *Our Lady of Guadalupe* xxi-xxii)

In religious research, we observe descriptions like the preceding passages. Both Brenda Brasher and Jeanette Rodriguez detail women's religious experience. They investigate the ways women empower themselves through religion. For them and many others, religion is more than a prayer at dinner, a song at a service, or a pilgrimage to a holy site. Religion colors women's being. It creates meaning, transforms communities, and brings women simultaneously closer to life and death. It teaches women who they are and where they are going. Religion also is a site of self-determination and action. Whether in the intense religious participation of women Brenda Brasher describes or in

the empowering worship of Our Lady of Guadalupe noted by Jeanette Rodriguez, religion provides women with opportunities to act. To look at the behaviors, beliefs, rituals, and worldviews of the young and old, rich and poor, male and female is to uncover religion and therefore to understand the ways it transforms lives.

For some women, religion provides an opportunity for agency; for others, it works within institutions of power to oppress and marginalize them. Many times this situation is ambiguous because religious institutions simultaneously restrain and liberate women. Often it is up to the women themselves to resist, defy, and withstand patriarchal authority that would limit their potential. They negotiate power within religion in order ultimately to transform it. Various scholars have written about the ways women negotiate agency in religion. Phyllis Mack, Linda Arthur, and Susannah Heschel each identify ways women embrace religion in order to transform their lives. Some theorists suggest that patriarchal religions like Christianity should change their ways and others advise women to drop them altogether. Regardless of their political ties, feminist identification, or outright disapproval, the majority of women choose to continue their involvement in religion. But to what extent is their ongoing participation in religion a choice?

Throughout this thesis, I explore ways that agency gets written into women's religious experience. I focus in particular on women's religious experience within Christianity. Although agency is often difficult to define, it is tied closely to identity, subjectivity, autonomy, and freedom. "Agency and the capacity for rational self-determination are seen as illusory products of the subjects' discursive position, as the subject is viewed as fissured and constantly 'in process'" (Gamble 324). Agency is the

pursuit of self-authorization, self-control, and self-presence. The agency of women is particularly difficult to ascertain. Women live in a patriarchal culture that often limits their economic, political, and social potential. That is not to say, however, that women do not experience agency at all. Often times, they are able to react, adapt, oppose, or amend the conditions that would otherwise limit them, most likely within the very institutions that seek to control women's behavior and marginalize their experience.

I write this thesis also as a criticism of a dominant theory of agency within the academic study of religion, rational choice theory (Bruce, Chaves, Demerath, Miller, Neitz and Mueser, Nelson, Risman and Ferree, Sullivan, Zafirovski). Although I focus exclusively on the Christian religion, my criticisms have implications for scholars who apply rational choice theory to a broader context of religion. Rational choice is an economic and scientific model that seeks to describe human behavior. When applied to religious studies, it attempts to explain why it is that people partake in religion. It posits that, within a stable market, men and women embrace religion in order to accomplish goals. For its proponents within feminist studies in religion, rational choice theory is especially helpful in uncovering religious agency because it assumes women's strategic involvement on behalf of enhancing their agency, in even the most sexist and patriarchal organizations.

In this thesis, I identify key criticisms of rational choice including feminist objections. I discuss how, in general, rational choice is challenged. I also highlight three additional problems with utilizing the theory to describe women's religious experience. Rational choice does not recognize the components of power within gender because it

relies on notions of agents engaged in autonomous, independent decision-making. Rather than recognize the powers at work in women's lives, it glosses over fundamental gendered differences in submission, institutional control, and hierarchal authority. Further, rational choice theory ignores the body. Although both men and women live embodied lives, they experience their bodies differently. Because rational choice does not establish the body within religious experience, it solidifies the mind/body distinction within Western Christian traditions and conceals women's action. Moreover, rational choice theory removes religion from culture. Instead of situating religious experience within shared group history, it isolates individual responses to cultural limitations. Isolation dislocates women from cultural components of power, creating a false portrait of religion and concealing women's resistance to historical and cultural restrictions.

In order to examine these three issues more completely, within this thesis I offer a comparison of Brenda Brasher and Jeanette Rodriguez's texts. In her text, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power*, Brasher enters into two Christian Fundamentalist communities, Bay Chapel and Mount Olive, in order to assess female agency. She analyzes the conversion narratives of female congregants and their interaction within sex-segregated Bible studies. Brasher finds that although women are denied access to male centers of authority, they find empowerment among the all-female enclaves within fundamentalist congregations. Her conclusion rests on a rational choice analysis. She believes that women choose to enter into patriarchal relationships to power in order to alleviate cultural stressors such as economic pressures, divorce, and disillusionment from mainstream gender ideology.

Rodriguez also investigates agency. Her work, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican-American Women*, examines Mexican-American women's relationships to the Catholic icon, Our Lady of Guadalupe. Through a psychosocial framework, Rodriguez uncovers the historical, cultural, and political symbolism of Guadalupe. She believes that while Guadalupe was once a tool of Spanish colonization, contemporary Mexican-American women utilize her image, tale, and symbolism to transform their experiences. Ultimately, Rodriguez believes Mexican-American women build relationships to Guadalupe in order to resist acculturation in their own lives. As I argue in the thesis, Rodriguez's analysis provides an instructive alternative to Brasher's rational choice analysis. Through a comparison of their texts in the remaining chapters of this thesis, I outline the reasons why research into women's lives needs to take into account gender, the body, and culture.

I aim in this thesis to situate rational choice theory within the framework of religious studies itself. I attribute the predominance of rational choice theory in the field to a Protestant bias in religious studies. As a normative category, the Protestant emphasis in the field mandates what may be considered religion. I demonstrate also how it authorizes doctrine and solidifies institutional power, continues to marginalize oppressed groups, denies others subjectivity, and most telling of all, does not adequately reflect popular religion (Hubbard, Orsi "Forum", Smith, Sullivan, and Wills). I argue that, when we contest rational choice theory, we also contest a Protestant bias in religious studies. By locating women's autonomy within her body, addressing her gendered experience, and situating religion within culture we destabilize these fixed notions of religion and de-

center scholar's power to grant authority to belief-based systems of worship and interpret religious experience within a limited context.

Finally, I consider rational choice theory from a perspective attuned to a Protestant bias in religious studies in order to pursue an alternative form of women's religious experience. I utilize insights into the sociology of religion outlined by Mary Jo Neitz. Within her scholarship, Neitz has applied a feminist framework to the sociology of religion. She has completed research on a variety of religious behaviors ranging from quasi-religious women's groups to institutional groups of Catholic men (Neitz "Quasi-Religions"). However, it is not her original research that propels me to include her in this thesis; rather, I find compelling her critical analysis of sociological theory. She has proposed guidelines for a feminist analysis of religious experience (Neitz "Feminist Theory"), complicated the sociology of religion by framing the cultural turn within sociology to include studies of gender (Neitz "Gender"), challenged the relationship between researcher and subject within religious studies (Neitz "Walking"), and persuaded theorists to undertake woman-centered analysis (Neitz "Queering"). While she has not analyzed Brasher's or Rodriguez's texts, her insights into each of these issues have guided my analysis of rational choice theory. By piecing together her insights on themes such as feminist frameworks, women's experience, and religious studies, I shape an alternative to the rational choice theory of agency in this thesis. Inspired by Neitz, I pursue the experiential level of group experience, focus on acts rather than beliefs, create an embodied vision of religion, clarify power *for* and *over*, and note the plurality of powers at work in women's lives.

In her essay, "Gender and Culture: Challenges to the Sociology of Religion," Neitz recognizes that in order to acknowledge women's religious agency we must search for alternative notions of autonomy that address lived experience. She claims that scholars need to transition from binary categories within social structures to a relational notion of the self. In response to the universal, individual actor in social contract and economic theory (rational choice theory), new social movements need to problematize the use of "generic man." Really, Neitz notes, the generic man was a very specific man: white, heterosexual, middle-class, and Western. Because of the prominence of male experience in universalizing theory, deviance is viewed, not in relationship to a norm, but rather as a reconstitution of the norm. Instead, Neitz suggests narrative as a method of analysis; because it effectively starts from the bottom up, within it researchers may locate the self and pay attention to voices at the margin rather than center. Neitz's solution, then, is to begin at the individual level of lived experiences rather than at the institutional level of normativation.

In the case of religion, transitioning to lived experience means moving away from thinking about religion in terms of rules and beliefs and focusing instead on practices: scholars should focus on what people do rather than on what people say. Scholars call this move a variety of names, "lived religion" or "practice theory of religion." Neitz points out that the emphasis on belief has focused the academy almost exclusively on Protestantism and on a disembodied belief-based version of religion. Instead, Neitz believes we should create an embodied vision of lived religious experience by addressing the impact of gender and sexuality on both experience and autonomy.

In, "Feminist Theory and Religious Experience," Neitz formulates feminist suggestions for the academic study of religion. Within this essay, we gain insights into a viable feminist solution to concerns that I will raise about applying rational choice theory to descriptions of women's actions. She believes that feminist accounts of women's religious experience should affirm the self rather than deny it, emphasize the female body, offer a positive evaluation of the will, and also allow reevaluation of women's bonds and heritage (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 527-8). Ultimately, a feminist alternative to rational choice theory needs to illustrate the distinction between legitimating control over others and negotiating authority for controlling the self. As Neitz illustrates,

We need to use both definitions of power and to examine how religion provides legitimacy for control over others (especially women) as well as how religion provides legitimacy for acting autonomously (again, especially for women). (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 531)

Although agency is often conceived in terms of individual power *to*, we must also note the ways power works *over* individuals.

In writing this thesis, I reject notions of the disembodied autonomous self. Instead, I believe that we need to address the ways institutions produce order as well as selves. Therefore, I rely on Neitz's view of agency that does not focus on single structures acting on individuals, but rather a plurality of powers enacted upon groups. This relational view of agency looks much different than traditional notions of freedom. In an effort to break down normalizing categories, Neitz's notion of agency demands mutuality in recognition and an awareness of the ways culture structures experience (Neitz "Gender and Culture").

As an alternative to rational choice, I am inspired by Neitz to pursue group experience. I focus on acts rather than on beliefs. I establish embodied experience, I distinguish between the freedom to govern the self and power to control others, and I note a plurality of powers at work to create experience. This alternative is much different than rational choice accounts of agency. Whereas rational choice theory appears to hand out agency to all self-reflective women, my approach focuses on experiences and appears, on the surface, to hinder agency. For, when I take into account all of the social institutions, ideologies, and cultural mechanisms that form women's experience, there appears to be no freedom. However, within an embodied, experiential description, attuned to the effects of gender and culture, I find that women's agency lies not in choosing to live freely, but in transforming their futures in resistance to circumstances. As an account of women's experience, then, I find an experiential account not only more accurate, because it describes real women's experiences more astutely, but also more promising because it allows for actual agency.

Many feminist scholars seek to uncover women's agency. I conceived this project because I was interested in women's religious experience, agency, and embodiment. Religion provides a fertile ground for discovery for feminists interested in autonomy and freedom. Although recent scholarship has emerged that articulates women's authority and agency within religion, often times, theories like rational choice reduce women's freedom to an idealized choice. Rather, I want to identify a type of religious agency that is based upon women's lived experience. In order to uncover sites where women experience agency within religion, I believe we need to recognize the roles

gender, the body, and culture play in women's lives. They limit potential and marginalize experience. Yet each offers freedom within resistance. Accounts of women's agency need to illustrate moments of resistance, outline the capacity for agency by real women, and problematize rationalistic notions of agency.

These critiques offer insights into problems with rational choice theory. Rational choice does not accurately describe women's agency because it does not take into account women's unique experiences. Culture, the body, and relationships to power affect women's lives. These absences reflect Protestant biases within the academic study of religion. The emphasis on autonomous individuals masks larger sociological frameworks that organize women's experience. In order to truly articulate women's agency researchers must note the differences between men and women's experiences as well as the frameworks that organize their lives. Forces like economics, power differentiation, the cultural production of knowledge, and subjectivity, each impact women's experiences and require that any researcher searching for women's agency locate women's action in resistance to the forces that impact their lives.

In an effort to devise theory that reveals women's experience rather than obscure it, I want to reformulate frameworks that rely on the universalized male perspectives. Although, as I outline in Chapter Two, rational choice theory establishes agency, makes multilevel analysis available, reunites religion with science, and provides models to predict human behavior, it is a problematic resource for the academic analysis of religion. Its claims are overstated, it conceals institutional power, and it leaves no room for irrational behavior in religion. Rational choice theory is especially troubling for feminist

theory. It does not address gender and it is built upon a universal model of individual freedom. Because of these faults, it does not accurately reflect women's lives.

In addition to these criticisms, in this thesis I argue that rational choice theory should not be utilized to describe women's experience because it does not address gender as a relationship to power, ignores the body, and erases culture. Through a comparison of Brasher and Rodriguez's texts, I illustrate why we need to recognize these three components of women's experience within religious studies. As a relationship to power, gender restricts women's access to personal and institutionalized power within religion. We need to articulate the ways it influences themes of submission and is reflected in hierarchical structures to authority. The body also shapes women's religious experience. It orients women in the world, connects them to others, and reveals women's religious action. Finally, culture must always be taken into account in religious studies. By articulating religion's embeddedness in culture we allow for alternative narratives to emerge in resistance to powers that shape women's experience.

CHAPTER 2

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION WITHIN RELIGIOUS STUDIES: A PROLEGOMENON FOR A CRITICAL INTERROGATION

Rational choice theory is widely considered to be a useful framework of analysis for researchers who seek to explain religious behavior, and is a powerful tool for inquiry although it is not without its critics. According to its proponents, rational choice theory establishes all human subjects as agents (Spickard and Zafirovski), makes multilevel analysis available (Iannaccone "Voodoo Economics"), reunites religion with science (Iannaccone "Rational Choice," Miller, and Stark, Iannaccone and Finke), and provides a model with which to predict human behavior (Chaves, Hechter and Kanazawa, and Iannaccone "Voodoo Economics"). However, critics of rational choice have noted that its claims are overstated (Bruce *Choice*, Demerath, and Miller). It reduces institutional action to individual acts (Bruce *Choice* and Zafirovski) and leaves no room for the irrational components of religion (Zafirovski). Adding a feminist perspective, we also see that rational choice theory is criticized because it does not address gender. It is built upon individualistic models of personal autonomy informed predominately by men's typical experience; because rational choice theory is modeled after male experience, it does not accurately reflect women's lives (Blank, Nelson, and Risman and Ferree).

Rational choice first emerged in the field of economics to describe the microeconomic level of human behavior. Utilitarian individualism or rational choice is attributed to Adam Smith, known as the father of economics (Hak). In the past few

decades, rational choice theory has leapt out of the field of economics and emerged in several other areas of study: psychology, sociology, and game theory. At its most basic level, the theory claims that each day, rational individuals weigh their options and act in order to attain goals. "Individuals, because of human nature, make a rational trade-off between costs and profits" (Hak 403). The theory emphasizes an individual's economic drive to practice cost-benefit analysis. For example, in "Why Strict Churches are Strong," Laurence Iannaccone claims that individuals enact cost-benefit analysis when choosing denominations. According to Iannaccone, churches that command strict behavioral norms provide members with the most guidance in secular and religious living for the least monetary investment.

Since the 1980's, rational choice has emerged within sociology as a major theoretical framework. Rational choice has its own academic journal, *Rationality and Society*. In 1995, the *Journal for Scientific Research of Religion* devoted a special issue to its assessment. Enthusiasm for rational choice has led some theorists to claim that the insurgence of rational choice in social theory is not a trend, but a major paradigm shift (Coleman). In fact, Green and Shapiro assert that in 1992, rational choice theory accounted for 40% of research investigating religious behavior. They note that although very few American universities offer degrees in rational choice theory, many researchers rely on it to describe religious behavior.

In the 1960's, Rodney Stark worked with William Bainbridge and Roger Finke to tailor rational choice to the sociology of religion (Nauta). When applied to religious phenomena, scholars can utilize rational choice to uncover the determinants of religious

belief and behavior, the nature of religious institutions, and the social and economic impact of religion. Laurence Iannaccone claims that there are three basic assumptions behind the rational choice application to religion:

- Individuals act rationally, weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits.
- The ultimate preferences (or 'needs') that individuals use to assess costs and benefits tend not to vary much from person to person or time to time.
- Social outcomes constitute the equilibria that emerge from the aggregation and interaction of individual actions. (Iannaccone "Rational Choice" 26)

That is, rational choice theorists assume that in a stable market, they can perceive and analyze social behavior at a micro level. Drawing on this analysis they can show that individuals act to maximize personal benefits.

At its core, rational choice theory emphasizes belief. Stark notes that "since the objects of interest are *religious* organizations, serious and extensive attention is given to the *contents* of religion – to doctrine, to what people *believe*..." (Stark "Bringing Theory" 3). When they utilize a rational choice approach, theorists look at the beliefs of an individual and attempt to reason out why they act as they do. Religion, then, for proponents of rational choice, is a system that offers its participants a series of belief-based rewards. Rational choice theorist's emphasis on belief is a strategic one; Iannaccone, Stark and others want to interpret religious action in terms of an intellectual choice.

Another key aspect of rational choice theory is the relationship between choice and agency. Within the theory, agency is implied implicitly. Theorists assume that individuals act freely in order to maximize benefits. As Zafirovski notes, the general assumption behind rational choice theory "is purposeful human behavior or teleology

attributed to individual agency rather than social structure on the grounds that societies have no purposes or needs" (42). Because a society has no needs, individuals within society are its driving forces. They are *the* actors. Therefore, rational choice presupposes agency within all individuals.

Explicitly or implicitly, many rational choice theorists tend to rehabilitate the concept of *homo economicus* ('economic man') as a perfectly rational, optimizing, calculating and forward-looking agent, at the expense of its alternatives, including the much-maligned *homo sociologicus*... (Zafirovski 43-44)

Unlike theories that attribute individual actions to socialization or culture, rational choice inherently situates action, agency, and purpose within individual actors.

That rational choice asserts the presence of agency within all human beings is certainly not its only strength; however, it is one of its most striking. When looking at women's religious action, theorists of rational choice may claim immediately that women are free agents, even in the most oppressive and seemingly tyrannical religious affiliations. Based upon women's choice to affiliate with desired groups, researchers may claim that women act freely in order to choose to belong to restrictive denominations. Spickard notes that rational choice portrays, in Mary Douglas's terms, an 'active-voice sociology.' "It presents people making decisions for themselves, not as unthinking automata. It emphasizes agency, rather than structure, and portrays people as active participants in their own lives" (Spickard 102). Rather than view women as victims of violence, abuse, and oppression, researchers may identify the ways women choose to act within patriarchal organizations. Because the theory situates action within the individual, rational choice allows researchers to view subjects in control of their

religious lives, aware of religious benefits, and acting upon institutions. They, rather than institutions, regulate action.

In addition to attributing agency to persons' direct initiatives or actions, other strengths of rational choice theory include: creating a multi-level analysis, uniting religion with science, and providing a model for human behavior. Because rational choice allows theorists to combine several levels of analysis, they may establish a multi-level perspective on individuals and households, congregations and groups, and entire communities and societies (Iannaccone "Voodoo Economics"). Rational choice's comprehensive, multi-level vision is important because it can address macro and micro levels of human behavior and also deal with a broad range of subjects. Multi-level analysis, therefore, allows researchers to combine a variety of individual behaviors with societal change.

According to its supporters within religious studies, rational choice theory also challenges the notion that religion is unscientific. It contests other theoretical frameworks including Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, functionalism, psychological reductionism, and the theories of Weber and Durkheim. Unlike these others, rational choice takes belief seriously and situates religion firmly within the realm of science because it views religious faith and ritual within the realm of rational human behavior (Miller). It is a preferred theoretic framework for the sociology of religion because it also argues against secularization theory and pluralism (Iannaccone "Voodoo Economics?"). It also challenges early anthropological views of religion. That research espoused notions of a primitive mind and aligned religion with non-rational, infantile wish

fulfillment. Stark, Iannaccone, and Finke claim that the goal of rational choice is to reconnect religion with science. "For many leading scholars, religion was not so much a phenomenon to be explained as it was an *enemy* to be overcome" (Stark, Iannaccone and Finke 436). Instead, they aim to realign religion with science and rationality.

A final strength of rational choice theory is that it provides models for human behavior. Because it builds on a social scientific approach, rational choice can construct and test human behavior, provide an all-encompassing framework, and generate new questions, methods, and hypotheses (Iannaccone "Voodoo Economics?"). It can also integrate a number of predictions in one framework, explain rather than classify, and combine macro and micro levels of analysis (Chaves, Hechter and Kanazawa). Because it creates unifying concepts, rational choice theory can be used to describe human behavior and also create a model to predict actions. For example Iannaccone, in "Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach," predicts that when church attendance costs are "high" in the event of a snowstorm or a summer three-day weekend, church attendance will be low. He also predicts that reduced benefits such as stand-in preachers and cutbacks in child-care will produce similar results. For all these reasons, rational choice theory is a powerful tool for inquiry. It finds agency in all individuals, creates a multi-level analysis, unites religion with science, and provides a model for human behavior. Stark claims, "rather than suggest that rational choice theories are the future of sociology, I would suggest instead that for the future of sociology, theory is the only rational choice!" ("Bringing Theory" 21).

Of course, as with any theory, there are also weaknesses. Critics of the rational choice approach point out that the all-encompassing goals of rational choice limit its application to real human behavior. For this reason, critics claim its results are overstatements. Rational choice theory also bases its conclusions on individual *actors* that reflect freedom of choice. Because rational choice assumes autonomous freedom at the level of the *individual*, critics claim that rational choice ignores *institutions* that shape choice and limit action. Finally, rational choice theory stresses logical decision-making to the extent that it erases all other types of decision-making that may be deemed non-rational. For example, religious acts based on emotions such as fear and desire may not be addressed within the rational choice framework. Therefore, critics believe that rational choice theory erases the irrational components of religious experience.

When I look at these concerns in more detail, I note that critics believe that the vast claims rational choice makes are overstatements that do not reflect subjects' perception of their own behavior. Cost-benefit analysis may give theorists insights into some motivators for action, but certainly not all. Chaves, Miller, and Bruce point out that the language of economics that sees belief as "cost" and "risk" and churches as "firms" competing for their share of "investors" does not accurately describe religious behavior. In fact, Chaves believes that the assumption that individuals engage in cost-benefit analysis to maximize benefits does not lead to *any* conclusions.

From this assumption one can derive nothing about actual empirical religious phenomena or behavior. One can derive only empty formal statements such as, 'Whatever religious choices an individual makes, those choices reflect a maximization process.' (Chaves 99)

Because the language is vague, any number of conclusions may be drawn from a rational choice analysis.

Critics also attack the move to create a unified body of work based on rational choice theory. Modeling theory, like rational choice, leads theorists to simplify the world rather than create a more complex understanding of it. Demerath notes, "throughout Iannaccone's analyses, the theory seems to enjoy a higher priority than the reality at stake" (106). Because rational choice is utilized to create large-scale sociological theory, it may in fact produce the results it claims to reveal.

Rational choice theory also is criticized for bypassing institutional factors due to its exclusive focus on individual acts. Zafirovski notes that methodological individualism within rational choice creates an emphasis on individual actions. This reduces the role of institutions and other social structures to mere outcomes initiatives undertaken by individual actors and treats institutions as neutral devices employed by individuals. Because rational choice theory regards all action as voluntary, the influence of institutions and social structures are not taken into account. "(T)he model centers on individual choices and minimizes their social, including institutional and cultural, constraints, thus allowing for voluntaristic actions only..." (Zafirovski 60). When rational choice does delve into larger social structures, it risks trivial or distorted results. Bruce recognizes the ways that rational choice creates an imprecise vision of society; by ignoring culture, theorists misrepresent religious behavior and emphasize secular society. To him, tearing cultural influence from religious studies affects the very definition of religion.

If one considers what sort of society it would be in which economic models of religious behavior worked well, the answer must be one in which religion (the supreme producer of cultural limitations on economizing) no longer matters at all. (Bruce "Religion and Rational Choice" 205)

Because rational choice does not address institutional action situated in culture, it limits all action to an idealized individual choice. An emphasis on the individual erases large-scale social, economic, and political motivations from religious action.

Finally, critics of rational choice within the field of religious studies note that the emphasis on rationality in religious behavior excludes any action that is deemed irrational. Examples of positive yet irrational factors in religious behavior include fear, hope, and trauma. Amy Hollywood exemplifies a more nuanced analysis than rational choice. She connects traumatic memory with religious behavior in *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. According to Hollywood, mystics utilize the sense of community among humans brought on by trauma in order to forge mutuality with others. Her analysis of mystics working through trauma illustrates the irrational components of religious behavior that may not be expressed utilizing rational choice theory. Excluding the non-rational components of religion limits the scope of human behavior described by rational choice. Instead, critics argue that there needs to be room for the irrational within religion. According to Zafirovski, "by neglecting the nonrational and over-stressing the rational, the model misconstrues the complexity and variety of human behavior by reducing it to a simple and seductive formula..." (60). An emphasis on rationality, in this way, limits what researchers deem as religious behavior.

These criticisms of rational choice are important. The theory sometimes generates overstatements and risks ignoring culture and institutional action. When employed in analysis of religious experience it also problematically limits religion to merely rational experience. When adopting a gendered lens, we find additional criticisms of rational choice. Feminist critics focus on the lack of attention to gender as an organizing framework for women's experience and the predominance of the privileged autonomous consciousness within rationality that aligns the individual, autonomous actor with masculine subjective experience. Risman and Ferree, Nelson, and Blank each find rational choice theory problematic because it presents the world as ungendered and bases personal choice on a privileged male perspective; therefore, rational choice is incapable of describing women's experience.

As noted, rational choice does not address the power of culture and social institutions to limit and formulate personal choice (Bruce and Zafirovski). Because rational choice overlooks these organizing frameworks, it presents the world in an ungendered way. Although theorists have attempted to add gender into an analysis of behavior, because choice and freedom are presumed, they have not accurately reflected the role of gender in creating women's experience. The problem with ignoring the relationship between gender and freedom, as Risman and Ferree point out, is that "leaving gender invisible can only produce potentially hazardous new structures" (781). Because rational choice theorists ignore the roles race, class, ethnicity, and gender play in men and women's lives, they reproduce inequality and oppression. Instead, researchers

need to become aware of the effects of gender and create a framework in which these effects may be articulated rather than masked.

Because rational choice does not address gender and is constructed upon a model of privileged male autonomy, feminists critics like Risman and Ferree argue that it cannot adequately describe women's experience. It neither recognizes the sociological motivations of women nor articulates women's economic situation. Risman and Ferree reveal gendered effects on women's experience of which rational choice theorist Coleman has been unaware. In his 1992 address to the American Sociological Association, he claims that parents are less invested in raising children because they cannot share in their future economic potential. Risman and Ferree declare, "(Coleman) appears blind to the gendering of nurturing work and of the power structures and relationships in which such work is embedded" (775). Coleman's purely economic interpretation of life skews his portrait of the American family because he does not address the difference between male and female incentives in childrearing. Women have different investments in child rearing because of the psychological connection between mothers and children. "Blindness to these dynamics of gender (privilege and power) explains why narrow rational-choice models are such poor explanations of families" (Risman and Ferree 777). Because rational choice does not discern institutionalized power, it wrongly attributes motivation to individual action and preferences rather than to sociological and psychological organizations like mothering.

Rational choice theory also is incapable of describing women's economic state. The economic world of women differs dramatically from that of men. Because an

economic model based on male experience is not applicable to women's lives, Blank claims that economics needs to be redefined and reformulated based on a more inclusive definition, a redefining of the market over place and time, and a greater inclusiveness of different methodologies in order to move away from an individualistic structure of human behavior (Blank 134-136). At issue are the use of "man" as a universal category and the use of "economic man" as a metaphor for all economic behavior.

In an attempt to devise theories that reflect women's experience rather than conceal it, feminists like Blank suggest that we reformulate frameworks, like rational choice, that rely on the universal male perspectives. Rational choice theory is certainly a powerful tool for sociologists looking to describe religious action. It establishes all human subjects as agents, makes multilevel analysis available, reunites religion with science, and provides a model with which to predict human behavior. However, critics of rational choice have noted that its claims are overstated, it reduces institutional action to individual acts, and it leaves no room for components of religion that may be considered irrational. When we add a feminist perspective, we also see that rational choice theory does not account for the role of gender in differentiating men and women's experience. Rational choice is built upon a model of personal autonomy most typical of the male experience; because it mirrors male experience, it does not accurately reflect women's lives. It also leaves little room for diversity within religion and among the women who participate in religion.

Additional Problems with the Rational Choice Approach

Bruce, Blank, Demerath, Nelson, Risman and Ferree, Miller, and Zafirovski have made very helpful contributions to the critical literature on rational choice theory. General criticisms and criticisms offered from a feminist perspective have illuminated weaknesses in the rational choice approach, despite the strengths articulated by its proponents. Criticisms of rational choice are of vital importance to the field of religion, on which I focus in this thesis. If scholars of religion hope to offer analyses of religious phenomena that are adequate to its richness and complexity, they will need to employ rational choice theory with caution. My own research supports such a move.

In my research, I have identified several additional ways that rational choice theory is limited when describing women's religious experience. To begin, rational choice does not address gender as a relationship to power. Although feminist critics of rational choice point out that the theory does not take gender into account (Blank, Nelson, Risman and Ferree), they refer exclusively to the differences in men and women's experiences. These feminists claim that because rational choice theory subscribes to "free will" notions of human nature, it sweeps under the rug all of the powers that work to shape and build experience. Disregarding these forces could be potentially dangerous for women because, as Risman and Ferree point out, theories that overlook societal influences keep women ignorant to the forces that form their experiences. In the case of religion, the propensity of rational choice theory to discount gender is especially suspect. Religion is traditionally one of the forces of oppression in women's lives. The dangers of relying on rational choice models to describe women's religious agency is not only that

of misrepresentation, but also that of domination. It may blindside women from identifying the cause and management of oppression. Therefore, in order to adequately describe women's experience, we must also take into account the ideologies, mechanisms, and relationships of power at work that shape their experience.

Inspired by these objections, I have resolved to delve further into the ways that gender structures women's lives. Although Blank, Nelson, and Risman and Ferree suggest that researchers distinguish between the differences in men and women's lives, these feminists do not regard gender as a relationship to power. After all, gender plays a role in women's access to institutional and personal control. Theorists need to conceive of gender as a relationship to power within religious studies in order to portray women's experience more accurately and also reveal centers of oppression in women's lives. Therefore, in my research I have found that rational choice theory is a problematic framework for women's religious experience because it does not recognize the ways gender structures women's access to power.

Moreover, I find rational choice theory ineffectual in describing women's religious experience because it ignores the presence of the body in religious deeds, motivation, and ideology. Although critics of rational choice identify several pressing problems with the theory, none of them notice the omission of the body as an object of inquiry by rational choice theory. Any research query into religious behavior needs to situate experience within a body. After all, women and men lead embodied lives. They interpret the world and connect with others through bodies. The body also plays an important role in religion. Bodies connect to religion through ritual. Even in religious

traditions that exclusively stress belief, bodies are present. In belief-based religions like Protestantism, the body takes center stage in Christian ideology and doctrine that attempts to suppress, deny, and control bodily desires and drives. In the end, all religious traditions attempt to address the limitations imposed on humans by their bodies. Bodies hurt, heal, and die; if anything, religion is an immediate response to embodied living.

As a theory that stresses belief above action, rational choice attempts to divorce religious experience from the body. It neither addresses the limitations bodies impose on women nor recognizes the ways the body is related integrally to religious behavior. Because it does not recognize the prominence of the body within religious experience, rational choice theory also solidifies mind/body distinctions within Western Christian traditions (Neitz "Feminist Theory"). Rather than *align* religion with embodied living, rational choice theory punctuates the schism between religion and the body. Reinforcing mind/body distinctions is especially problematic for women. Because they are associated with the body, sin, and death, women especially are urged to overcome their bodies. Therefore, within Christianity, women must become symbolic men in order to attain religious subjectivity. In response to the mind/body dichotomy, researchers must note the ways the body influences women's religious behavior. Continuing to ignore the body will only result in the concealment of women's action and the denial of women's religious subjectivity.

Further, rational choice theory does not accurately describe women's experience because it removes religion from culture. Critics like Bruce and Zafirovski do note that rational choice denies the cultural embeddedness of religion; however, they do not

specify why neglecting culture within religious studies is especially problematic for a scholarly analysis of women's and other oppressed groups' religious experience. Like gender, culture is another organizing framework for experience. Women contend not only with negotiating power with men, but also with challenging ways they have been historically marginalized in different places and times.

As one of many foundations that color life, culture provides insights into women's experience. Without recognizing the ways history and political climate affect religion, researchers make it impossible for narratives of women's resistance to emerge. Rational choice theory does not articulate resistance in women's lives because it obscures sociological forces that create group conditions for women. It merely portrays women as individual actors reacting to individual problems. Instead, researchers need to recognize the ways women react to cultural forces that shape their experience. Only then will researcher's analyses adequately account for complex relationships between organizations of power and women's lives within them. My exploration of Rodriguez and Brasher will highlight resistance as a key to women's agency.

Women's Experience, Agency, and Resistance

Resistance as a key factor in analyzing women's agency exposes a particular weakness in rational choice theory. Identifying resistance demands that researchers address the cultural, historical, and political limitations faced by women. In discussing the relationship between religion and culture, I isolate resistance as critical to illuminating agency. In doing so, my research is inspired by Heschel, Butler, Bordo, Germai and Lehnerer, and Arthur, all of whom find women's agency within resistance.

These scholars demonstrate that if I am to identify sites of female freedom, I must search for ways women resist the forces that shape their lives. Because rational choice theory is incapable of identifying women's resistance, it may not be used in scholarship to truly uncover women's agency.

It is often difficult to identify sites of women's agency. If we are to take into account all of the ways that organizing frameworks like culture and language create women's experience, only a small window for freedom appears. Freedom is not gained by women through outright rejection of cultural, historical, and economic forces, but rather in subtle and persistent resistance to these influences. Because women's action is a *reaction* to structures, I believe that any account of women's experience needs to situate agency within resistance.

Susannah Heschel illustrates the importance of situating women's agency in resistance. In "Gender and Agency in the Feminist Historiography of Jewish Identity," she asks the controversial question, "Can women be Jews?" In the past, Jewish women have navigated religious agency in gender exclusive ways, typically in their homes and in the company of other women and children. However, with modernization and the onset of equal rights, forms of religious practice based in the Jewish home that are unique to women have been erased. Heschel believes that while women demand equal access to the synagogue and leadership, in so doing, they have devalued traditional religious roles for women.

In their pursuit of autonomy, women have destroyed sites of female authority in Jewish practice. The problem with damaging these sites, according to Heschel, is that

although theorists' ultimate goal is to recover women's voices and attribute agency, feminist scholars run the risk of creating emancipatory narratives that mislead and misinterpret these women's actual experiences. In the end, both the reporting and the negotiation of agency are difficult; after all, in an attempt to encourage women to embrace religious authority and equality, "women become men to be Jews" (Heschel 587).

Heschel's work illustrates the importance of identifying tales of women's resistance. Without noting the ways women act and react within Judaism, we destroy traditional sites of female authority. Theories like rational choice that base women's agency upon a male model of freedom are in jeopardy of erasing sites of women's empowerment. They risk mandating women become symbolic men in order to uncover agency. In an effort to avoid concealing agency, researchers must note the ways women's experiences are shaped through institutional power. This generates a more accurate portrayal of women's experience and also creates opportunities for resistance.

In many ways, it is difficult to image freedom within constraint. After all, women are often subjected to severe control within culture. However, in order to identify sites of female agency, we must also take female control into account. Two foundational postmodern theorists, Judith Butler and Susan Bordo, both present alternative views of agency that take into account cultural control. They each find agency within resistance to organizational norms that limit female experience. Based on these theorists' work, other researchers position female agency in resistance to religious control. They find female

agency and freedom in the subversion of familial roles (Germai and Lehnerer) and in resistance to bodily control through dress (Arthur).

Butler and Bordo find that agency is negotiated in a particularly complex way, through resistance to cultural forces that limit women's experience. Similarly, Germai and Lehnerer, in "Women's Agency and Household Diplomacy: Negotiating Fundamentalism," find agency through the fulfillment *and* subversion of familial roles by Iranian Islamic fundamentalists. Within fundamentalism, women occupy a very complicated position, fundamentalists often read women's liberation within culture as an adverse effect of modernization. In most instances, they oppose feminist claims to women's equality and work diligently to control women through laws, rituals, and rights that limit their freedoms. An example of control is the law that imposes veiling and the restriction of women's movement in public spaces in Iran.

However, that is not to say that women do not make choices within Islamic fundamentalism. Creative productions, advocacy in family courts, opposition to mandatory veiling, and election activism are all example of agency cited by Germai and Lehnerer. They find four strategies for women to transform the fundamentalist framework: subversion, co-optation, acquiescence, and collaboration. Throughout their study, Germai and Lehnerer counteract victimization narratives in perceptions of fundamentalist women. Ultimately, they distinguish between men and women's freedom.

To take seriously the creation of femininity and the materialization of women's bodies within culture (Butler and Bordo) we must note the ways in which women

participate in freedom differently. Differences in freedom reflect women's access to authority. As Germai and Lehnerer illustrate, "When men cooperate, women must contrive, and when men collaborate, women scheme or subvert" (571). Women's power lies within these tactics, therefore notions of women's agency must also address the ways femininity limits freedom but also can be used to negotiate it.

Similarly, Linda B. Arthur in "Deviance, Agency, and the Social Control of Women's Bodies in a Mennonite Community," creates a female mode of agency that addresses the limits to women's experience at the same time as it enables freedom. Through her ethnographic research on the body as a cultural symbol, Arthur found that Mennonite women express agency in their resistance to bodily control by minute changes in appearance and dress. In the Holdeman Mennonite community, women's dress is used as a metaphor for social control. As Mennonites, these women have a tentative relationship with the outer world, and a distressed relationship with masculine control. These tensions, Arthur believes, manifest in the sanctions of female dress within the community.

Not only does dress signify the boundaries of community (those inside vs. the outer world), but it is also a spiritual statement of piety and appropriate action. For women, it is at the same time, a place for patriarchal control and also a site for resistance to that control. Arthur claims that by wearing minimal makeup, spending time and money on their wardrobes, shoes, and polyester fabric choices, women are demonstrating subtle resistance.

While the women may appear submissive, their motivations are complex. They reinforce the dress norms while also resisting the image prescribed for them by the ministers. While there is overt submission, on a more covert level there is collective resistance, which supports women's dissension. (Arthur 95)

Mennonite women resist bodily control by slightly transforming their appearance. As a metaphor for both the personal body and the social body, the subtle complexities of dress in the Holdeman Mennonite community illustrate the ways Arthur believes, freedom and constraint go hand in hand.

Freedom within resistance is difficult to view from the outside, but from within we can see that there is need to address the social location of freedom, situate it within women's already gendered lives, and redefine agency in terms of it. Situating women's autonomy in terms of resistance pays attention to the powers at work that create female experience and also provides women with a real opportunity for agency. Freedom is not going to simply appear for women, they challenge, redefine, react, and contend in order to create opportunities for it.

The accounts of these theorists (Heschel, Butler, Bordo, Germai and Lehnerer, and Arthur) fashion women's agency within the social construction of femininity. They each recognize the force of patriarchal ideology to create bodies and mandate experience. Yet they each perceive agency within restraint. These researchers illustrate moments of resistance, outline the capacity for agency within real women, and problematize rational choice notions of agency that align autonomy with masculinity.

These accounts are substantial also because they illustrate problems with utilizing rational choice theory to describe women's religious behavior. Because rational choice

does not account for the forces that inform women's experience, it does not allow for narratives of resistance to emerge. Rational choice theory limits women's freedom by presenting agency only in an idealized notion of choice. If we were to rely on rational choice theory, we would miss out on alternative centers of female authority (Heschel), women's empowerment through dress (Arthur), and women's resistance to Islamic fundamentalist control (Germai and Lehnerer). Although both Brasher and Rodriguez pursue tales of women's agency, only one researcher allows narratives of resistance to emerge.

Comparing Brasher and Rodriguez: Insights for a Criticism of Rational Choice Theory

In this thesis, I substantiate my criticisms of rational choice by comparing two texts: Brasher's *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* and Rodriguez's *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican-American Women*. Brasher utilizes rational choice theory in her analysis of fundamentalist women and in doing so falls victim to these three additional problems with rational choice. She does not address gender as a relationship to power, ignores the body, and erases the cultural embeddedness of religion. Although her analysis attempts to identify female power within Christian fundamentalist groups, Brasher hides gendered organizational power, limits women's action, and conceals resistance. On the other hand, Rodriguez allows for an empowered, embodied, cultural response to emerge in her text. Throughout her analysis of Mexican-American women, Rodriguez recognizes the ways gender situates power, bodies enable communication and community, and cultural awareness allows complex tales of resistance to emerge.

By comparing Brasher and Rodriguez's texts, I illuminate these further weaknesses in rational choice theory. As an oppressive mechanism, gender influences women's lives. I have found that although Brasher's rational choice approach attempts to recognize the effects of gender in women's being by focusing her study on women's religious experiences, she does not adequately address the ways gender organizes power within that experience. Her account of gender is problematic because she does not recognize gendered relationships in themes of submission. Nor does she address different types of power at work in women's lives or note the ways hierarchical power at work in Christian fundamentalism is organized through gender.

As with the lived situation of the fundamentalist women in Brasher's study, Rodriguez's subjects, Mexican-American Roman Catholics, are also subordinated through religion. However, Rodriguez, who utilizes a psychosocial framework for inquiry, fashions an account of women's agency that recognizes the formative powers of gender on women's lives. Unlike Brasher, Rodriguez situates experience within group identity and locates multiple forms of oppression within women's lives. As a consequence, Rodriguez situates agency within resistance to these powers. Also, because Rodriguez recognizes that Our Lady of Guadalupe is an example of religious syncretism, she draws connections between domination and cultural symbols. For these reasons, in this thesis, Rodriguez is an instructive alternative to Brasher.

My comparison of Brasher and Rodriguez also illuminates ways in which rational choice does not address the body. As I have already outlined, bodies are not merely a single characteristic in identity, but rather affect experience. Through their bodies,

women are able to orient themselves, act, and create communities within the world. Uncovering the body in religious experience provides scholars with insights into these processes. Making an effort to write the body into religious research reveals these processes to the academic observer and provides her with the vocabulary to identify the ways women act within religious organizations.

Although Brasher attempts to underline the ways women choose to act within their all-female Bible studies, she veils the ways women react to fundamentalist ideology that attempts to confine their behavior. Theories like rational choice that emphasize religious belief obscure embodiment. By accentuating rationality and cognitive modes of behavior at the exclusion of all other possible manners of being, rational choice theory obscures sites of women's autonomy. Because Brasher utilizes a rational choice approach, she overlooks important deeds accomplished by women within fundamentalism and does not challenge the mind/body dichotomy within Christianity that problematically aligns femininity with sin and death.

Rodriguez, on the other hand, reveals women's religious achievements by underlining embodiment. She identifies the ways Mexican-American women see themselves reflected in the image of the Guadalupe. Because Our Lady of Guadalupe serves as a catalyst for Christian conversion for the indigenous population of Mexico we can see how the marginalized subjects, both women and the indigenous people, find self-reflection and group representation important for their religious identification. Rodriguez uncovers the ways women react to potentially limiting Catholic ideology by transforming their futures through the symbolism, tale, and image of Guadalupe.

Finally, my comparison of Brasher and Rodriguez demonstrates why the denial of religion's interconnection with culture by rational choice theory is problematic. Because rational choice emphasizes individual beliefs rather than group dynamics, religion is viewed as a matter of personal conviction. This perspective denies ways religion emerges within specific cultural horizons, a particular historical moment, or a definite political climate. Rational choice takes an unduly limited perspective on the relationship between an individual and community. Through an emphasis on individuality, Brasher's account of agency denies religion's embeddedness in culture and in doing so disallows tales of women's resistance. Rational choice theory overlooks resistance in three ways: it reproduces normative tales of women's experience rather than reveal women's narratives at the margins of culture, it solidifies the subject/object relationship in academic research, and also it denies group heritage by focusing exclusively on the individual level of human behavior.

On the other hand, cultural embeddedness is at the heart of Rodriguez's tale of agency. Her psychosocial framework situates Mexican-American identity in terms of group experience rather than individual opportunity. Because she defines religion, not as another personal characteristic, but rather as something that colors women's perspective she situates religion not as a choice, but as a worldview. When entangled in culture, religion is often times indistinguishable from it, because the two inter-relate, Rodriguez is able to recognize the impact of culture on identity formation. The women of her study are not only limited economically and politically, but because multiple identities emerge

within Mexican-American women, she is able to adapt to the complexity of women's experience and situate agency within resistance.

Unlike rational choice accounts of agency, locating agency within resistance addresses institutional relationships to power, provides women with realistic freedom, and because it is embodied, grants access to subjectivity within femininity. Yet, rational choice is a predominant theory among religious scholars. The popularity of rational choice among religious researchers raises several questions. Are rational choice and accounts of resistance simply two varieties of religious agency? Does it matter if scholars subscribe to one account or another?

Rational Choice and the Protestant Bias in Religious Studies

A discussion of rational choice theory in this thesis reflects broader trends in religious studies. For the past several years, a scholarly debate has ensued concerning a Protestant bias in religious studies. Departments, scholars, and journals within the field of religious studies traditionally have focused on white, Western, Protestant religious traditions, stressing theology, belief, textual analysis, practice, and ethics (Smith). What diversity universities do provide gets run through a Protestant filter; courses in Hinduism, Islam, or Judaism reflect a Protestant structure that emphasizes code (belief) and creed (doctrine) above cultus (ritual) (Orsi "Forum" and Smith).

Yet the dispute is not merely a question of diversity but of definition. When stressing belief-based, textually-centered religion, theorists effectively create a normative category. Hegemonic Protestantism not only whitewashes the religious and cultural landscape but also begins to mandate the sustenance of "religion." This is not an

innocent case of favoritism; rather, a normalizing ideology privileges white, Western, Protestant beliefs and renders illegitimate other forms of religious behavior. Scholars have identified the ways a Protestant bias in religious studies reproduces hierarchical and institutionalized power (Hubbard, Orsi "Forum," Sullivan, and Wills), creates a normative structure to define deviance (Orsi *Between* and Smith), marginalizes others (Orsi *Between*, Smith, and Wills), and strips Protestantism itself of diversity (Hubbard, Orsi *Between*, and Wills).

In her article, "Neutralizing Religion: Or, What is the Opposite of 'Faith-Based'?" Winnifred Fallers Sullivan uncovers the effects of a Protestant bias on the legal system. Sullivan claims that religious pluralism has led to an erasure of difference in respect to legal implications of religion. Ultimately, a Protestant bias not only keeps certain religious expressions and affiliations from institutionalized power but also affects what gets defined as religion.

For Sullivan, a cemetery dispute in which she was involved in 1999 is paradigmatic of a Protestant bias about religious experience. A Florida suit processed by the ACLU attempted to protect cemetery plot owners' rights to display religious paraphernalia that could be considered "kitschy." Although the Florida cemetery had rules against any plot adornment other than a flat plaque with permanent flower vase, in the 1980's it began to allow such decoration as small fences, benches, crosses, statuettes, and silk flowers. Most of these items, Sullivan notes, are associated with Catholic piety. However, in 1999, the cemetery abruptly began to reinforce the rules and removed all grave decorations.

The plaintiffs testified that the presence of these religious marks had influenced their decision to bury their loved ones at this particular cemetery and that these marks were not merely decorative but also were sites of religious acts. In the end, the judge ruled in favor of the cemetery. According to Sullivan, the Protestant bias in religious studies poses a problem because it fails to recognize diversity and also places constraints on the very definition of religion. Any practice outside of a muted, watered down, white, middle-class, Protestantism gets interpreted in the law as personal preference and within academia as something other than religion. Jamie Hubbard notes that the problem with doctrinal study is that it

inscribe(s) a narrowly prescriptive definition of what counts as religion, a definition that privileges the written expressions of elites, usually male, and thereby eliminates from consideration the vast majority of what religious people actually do. (60)

An emphasis on Protestantism limits other religions as well as Christianity. It prescribes the religion of elites not by evangelizing beliefs, but by reflecting back only religious doctrines and practices of those in power.

The interconnection between scholar's ability to influence norms and institutional power is important. As with all positions of power, the dominant group prevails in creating what counts as religion. "Religion" as an expression of cultural privilege and power, is created and maintained by and within certain institutions. To stress doctrine as a criterion for what counts as religion is to assume that people have a history of institutional power that authorizes their religious experience. Because religious authorization requires power, marginalized groups get excluded or written out of religion. Hubbard illustrates the problem with an emphasis on doctrine. Doctrinal study protects

the vested interests of elites; because it reflects only the beliefs of the powerful elite, it is not a true reflection of the religious experiences of the majority.

In a forum addressing the future of religious studies, Robert Orsi and David W. Wills each speculate on the emphasis on Protestantism within the academic study of religion. Wills points out that the establishment of Protestantism as the foundational religion of the Americas is simply untrue. Both Jamaica and Barbados held populations larger than New York and Massachusetts during the colonial period. According to him, the Protestant, white, mainstream is a myth. Africans and African Americans were forced into the margins because white Protestantism created and maintained those norms, not because Africans and African Americans were an aberration of the norm.

Similarly, Orsi claims that real religious action is taking place at the margins of culture. He believes that challenging the normative mainstream is important. His goal is not only to promote variety in religious reporting but also to advocate a critical look at social power. In an essay entitled, "Religion, Religions, Religious," Jonathan Smith also identifies the ways in which religion reproduces these relationships to power. Within his analysis of the scholarly use of the term "religion," Smith finds that religion is used as a dualistic binary to "other" cultural groups in order to deny subjectivity. Because religion can be used as a form of objectification, Smith believes that religion

plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon. (281-2)

Religion is in this way an organizing framework in which marginalized groups are denied subjectivity.

Fortunately, Orsi, in *Between: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, recognizes space for the agency of oppressed groups to emerge. He notes that scholarship about religion has always been forged in opposition. Like Wills, he addresses the ways religion has been used to reproduce power relationships. Orsi claims,

discourse about 'religions' and 'religion' was key to controlling and dominating (colonized) populations, just as religious practice and imagination were central to the way that the dominated themselves submitted to, contested, resisted, and reimagined their circumstances. (*Between* 178)

Religion, according to Orsi, marginalizes and oppresses entire populations of people; yet, at the same time, religion is utilized by the oppressed to react against domination. Like the accounts of women's religious experience and agency offered by Heschel, Germai Leherner, and Arthur, Orsi believes that religion provides avenues for the oppressed and marginalized through resistance.

Yet, the question remains, how may researchers approach others through religious inquiry and avoid reinstituting frameworks of power, yet continue to allow tales of resistance to emerge? Orsi suggests we develop a new goal in religious studies: to enter into otherness.

The point is not to make the other world radically and irrevocably other, but to render one's own world other to oneself as prelude to a new understanding of the two worlds in relationship to one another. (Orsi *Between* 202)

A problem within contemporary research is that the academy demands that scholars maintain a safe distance from the object of inquiry. Orsi suggests a new task for religious inquiry, to de-familiarize and de-center the researcher in order to reinterpret reality (Orsi

Between 195). To remake reality, researchers must maintain an in-betweenness, a shared transformational space between the scholar and object, self and other.

This in-between ground upon which a researcher...stands belongs neither to herself nor to the other but has come into being between them, precisely because of the meeting of the two. This is ground that would not have existed apart from the relationship between researcher and her subject. (Orsi *Between* 199)

Orsi believes researchers should use the ambiguity of religious interaction to break down the standard research model of subject/object positions. Only then may religious traditions be adequately described and marginalized groups adequately protected from research.

Orsi's scholarship is unlike traditional approaches to religious studies because it is transformative. It requires an act of faith on the part of the researcher to leave behind moral authority and truly engage with another. In order to accomplish community with another, Orsi claims that we must keep in mind that religion is embedded in history. We must allow multiple worlds and perspectives to emerge, set our own world in relationship to these other possibilities, and move back and forth between the two. Researchers need utilize the liminal space religion provides in order to address the transformational potential within human connectedness.

It is clear that we need a new approach to religious studies. As these experts have pointed out, hegemonic Protestantism within academia defines religion only within belief-based terms (Sullivan), authorizes doctrine and solidifies institutional power (Hubbard and Sullivan), does not adequately reflect popular religion (Hubbard, Orsi "Forum" and Wills), marginalizes non-Western, non-white religious experience (Orsi *Between*, Smith and Wills), and is used to deny subjectivity of others (Orsi *Between*,

Smith, and Wills). Because the Protestant bias in religious studies prescribes what gets interpreted as religious (Hubbard and Sullivan), theorists need to take a critical look at the creation and maintenance of social power (Orsi "Forum" and Wills). Otherwise, they run the risk of reproducing these institutional relationships (Smith). One strategy for offsetting the privileged position of the scholar recommends that researchers take advantage of the transformational space that materializes when two religious worldviews coalesce (Orsi *Between*). In order to do so, we must evaluate the theories that identify religious agency. As I show in this thesis, my criticism of rational choice theory contributes to such a critical exercise.

It is often difficult to articulate agency within women's religious experiences; yet, to avoid the challenge altogether would be a grave mistake. Scholars would create tales of women's victimization only. Instead, we need to heed Orsi's advice and find ways for alternative tales of resistance to emerge. In this thesis, I outline an alternative framework for religious studies. When researchers attempt to describe women's religious lives, they need to address the relationships of power that limit and marginalize women's experience. Because women's religious experience is embedded within their relationships to power, I suggest that researchers look for areas of resistance within religion as with the work of Heschel, Arthur, and Germai and Leherner. Rather than reveal dissent, rational choice theory masks female action, de-legitimizes forms of power exercised by marginalized groups, and denies the sociological embeddedness of religion.

As an alternative to rational choice, therefore, I recommend pursuing group experience, focusing on acts rather than beliefs, establishing embodied experience,

clarifying between freedom and control, and noting a plurality of powers at work to create experience. This framework for women's agency is much different than rational choice account of agency. Whereas rational choice theory appears to handout agency to all self-reflective women, this focus on experience appears, on the surface, to hinder agency. For, when I take into account all of the social institutions, ideologies, and cultural mechanisms that form women's experience, there appears to be no freedom. However, within an experiential description I find that women's agency lies not in the immediacy of their lived experience but in the transformation of their futures through their resistance to these situations. My experiential account is not only more accurate than are accounts grounded in rational choice theory, but also because I describe real women's experiences more astutely, my account allows for actual agency in the women's lives.

CHAPTER 3

TWO ACCOUNTS OF GENDER

In order to make claims about the rational choice account of agency, I plan to outline two different tales of women's religious experience. One attributes agency to rational choice; the other situates agency more tentatively within resistance to acculturation. Critics of the rational choice approach point out that its claims are overstated, it masks institutional action as personal preference, and limits behavior described as religious. Feminist scholars object to the use of rational choice to describe women's behavior because it presents the world as ungendered by concealing institutional action, bases personal choice on a universal perspective modeled after male privilege, and because of these two, is incapable of describing women's experience. In order to test the validity of these criticisms I will look for the ways two scholars account for institutional action, address gender as a relationship to power, and enable feminine forms of autonomy that construct freedom within women's limitations imposed on them by gender.

Brenda Brasher and Jeanette Rodriguez are two feminist scholars who have conducted extensive research on women's religious experience. Although each has researched Californian women in the 1990s, they highlight two radically different religious situations. Brasher focuses on a rapidly expanding, predominantly white, middle to upper-class group of Christian Fundamentalists; Rodriguez examines a working class, Mexican-American group of Roman Catholics whose devotions are directed toward Our Lady of Guadalupe. Each researcher gathered interviews with women focusing on

their relationships to power, their roles in religious organizations, and their perceptions of their experiences as Christian women. Ultimately, both Brasher and Rodriguez search for women's agency within religious experience. They both investigate the distinctive ways women gain power and autonomy within religion.

Throughout *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power*, Brasher traces empowerment by women within two fundamentalist churches, Bay Chapel and Mount Olive. Like the first wave of fundamentalism that occurred in the United States around the turn of the twentieth-century, contemporary fundamentalist gender ideology stresses female subordination, appropriate spheres of male and female activity, and in general, its opposition to modernization is hinged on changing gender roles. Brasher traces gendered divisions within her fundamentalist organizations. An example of the remnants of first wave fundamentalism is women's subordination to men. Based on the heterosexual model of power, women learn to submit to the will of their husbands, pastors, and authoritative male leaders. Similarly, Brasher claims that women embrace the restrictive gendered practices of fundamentalism due to a disappointment with contemporary culture. Brasher believes women are overwhelmed by divorce and "disheveled gender expectations" of modern secular life (9). Instead, fundamentalism offers women a solid foundation for rights, responsibilities, and relationships among men and women. In her research, Brasher discovers that gender bifurcates Bay Chapel and Mount Olive congregations into male and female spaces of worship.

However, within fundamentalist organizations, Brasher finds groups of women who organize within all-female enclaves, actively seek a voice, and influence the

powerful male elite who formally head the church. Bay Chapel and Mount Olive women meet in sex segregated Bible study groups to discuss faith, provide each other with support, and organize female church programs like missionary work, counseling, and outreach. These women build solid relationships with one another in an attempt to explore the complexities of female fundamentalist religiosity and also to create congregational authority. With these informal networks, women are able to act collectively to influence powerful male authority. For example, when a male pastor engage in an adulterous relationship with a church member he is counseling, Mount Olive women organize in order to remove him from his position and alter church procedure. They force leadership to allow women to council other women in order to buffer male pastors from unexpected extramarital relationships.

Brasher reconciles contradictions between submission and autonomy, oppression and freedom, by claiming that her female subjects choose to abide by fundamentalist gender guidelines. She believes that the women's willingness to enforce strict gendered divisions within the church body, at home, and in the community stem from inherent imbalances of power within the broader culture. "(T)o Christian fundamentalist women, the restrictive religious identity they embrace improves their ability to direct the course of their lives and empowers them in their relationships with others" (Brasher 4). According to Brasher, women within these fundamentalist organizations choose to submit to a theology that will otherwise subordinate them in order to gain control over the direction of their lives and increase their access to social resources.

The crux of Brasher's argument relies on her application of rational choice theory and its notion of autonomous freedom inherent in all human beings. Brasher utilizes a rational choice approach to uncover why women pursue restrictive religious traditions such as fundamentalism. Like other rational choice theorists, Brasher believes that women engage in religious acts in order to maximize benefits. Her appeal to rational choice is evident in several places. Brasher describes religious behavior in terms of a cost/benefit analysis. She believes that women submit to oppressive theology that subordinates them in order to maximize the benefits of fundamentalism including: consistency in belief, financial support for young mothers, and a community of other believers.

(T)he godly women of Bay Chapel and Mount Olive are dedicated to securing for themselves and their families a thoroughly religious, morally conservative life. To realize this goal, they invest themselves in fundamentalist congregations and then draw upon the symbolic resources they find and develop there to map out and assess their choices in life. (Brasher 29)

Other evidence of a rational choice approach in Brasher's text is her focus on a personal level of analysis. Rather than establish larger, sociological trends, she centers on the individual tales of women's religious experience. She also emphasizes personal belief. Instead of identifying ritual performed within groups, Brasher situates all religious action within women's isolated relationships with the Lord. These relationships, although often cultivated within the space of the Bible study, are the independent manifestations of each woman's choice to personally engage with the Lord. Mike, the senior pastor at Bay Chapel illuminates this emphasis on relationship-based faith, "Religion is man reaching up and trying to touch God. Relationship is God touching us" (Brasher 117). Clearly,

these relationships are an expression of personal religiosity; yet, they are built upon fundamentalist doctrine and form the foundation for male rule within fundamentalism. Finally, Brasher attributes all religious action to a conscious choice. According to her, women are aware of the patriarchal forces that confine them, yet continually choose to abide under fundamentalism's limitations and accept its protection.

Brasher focuses her research on all-female Bible study sessions. She does this for several reasons. Not only are the meetings a space for female empowerment; but within the study sessions, fundamentalist women share personal experiences of faith. Women read Biblical texts and attempt to interpret meaning within their own lives. Although fundamentalist belief stresses an inerrant Bible, Brasher's emphasis on the personal beliefs of women and the maintenance of a personal relationship with the Lord reflect her rational choice premise. Rather than link women's experiences to larger sociological trends, Brasher focuses exclusively upon the individual level of analysis.

In contrast, Rodriguez's *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican American Women* looks at the ways the story, image, and symbolism of Guadalupe impacts the identity of Mexican-American women. Guadalupe is an historical event, an empowering Mexican symbol, a Marian image, and a tale of colonization. According to Catholic tradition, ten years into the Spanish colonization of Mexico, the Virgin Mary appeared to the peasant Juan Diego. The Virgin spoke of building a temple at the site of encounter and appealed to Juan Diego to appear before the local bishop. After several meetings, Guadalupe left her image emblazoned on Juan Diego's cloak in order to convince the bishop that the Virgin Mary had truly appeared. Since the

sixteenth-century event, Guadalupe has been embraced by Mexican Catholics. She ushered in waves of Mexican conversion to Catholicism and serves as a national symbol of pride.

In many ways Roman Catholicism, like Christian fundamentalism, stresses patriarchal gender relations. Guadalupe is traditionally viewed as a focus of Marian devotion, thus her image represents women's submission to patriarchy because it establishes hierarchical order between men and women and prescribes feminine submission and passivity (Rodriguez 73). However, Rodriguez believes that Mexican-American women transform Guadalupe's symbol. Unlike other Marian sightings, Our Lady of Guadalupe emerged in sixteenth-century Mexico within a clash of cultures between Spanish imperialists and indigenous peoples who were subsequently enslaved. Rodriguez traces the psychic and emotional connection between Guadalupe and her human patrons through a psychosocial framework that attends to history, culture, and identity. She claims that religion, as a worldview, colors experience and cannot be separated from the culture within which it emerges. Rather than stress individual relationships to the divine, Rodriguez believes that Mexican-American women's experience is grounded in group history and shared culture. Because of the interconnection between history, identity, and culture, Rodriguez believes that religion and women's identities transform in a synchronous way.

Rodriguez is not interested in claims about the validity of Our Lady of Guadalupe's miraculous interventions in persons' lives. Her purpose is not to prove the mysterious power of Guadalupe but rather uncover her symbolic importance and use

among Mexican-American women. On the way, Rodriguez discovers a unique form of agency that stems from women's relationship to the icon. Although there are independent factors at work in the lives of Mexican-American women, Rodriguez believes they are connected to Guadalupe through an interpretive framework that stems from group history. Due to the presence of multiple forms of oppression in Mexican-American women's lives, Rodriguez identifies Guadalupe as a site of resistance. "Our Lady of Guadalupe provides (Mexican-American women) with a spiritual form of resistance to the sociopolitical negation of Mexican-American women" (Rodriguez xxi). One example comes from a Mexican-American woman named Ruth who claims, "She is a symbol, just that she's Mexican; it's my culture. I love her and she is part of my culture...I feel proud that we have the Virgin of Guadalupe on our side" (Rodriguez 133-134). As a symbol, image, tale, and relationship, Rodriguez situates Our Lady of Guadalupe as site of personal and political resistance for Mexican-American women.

Although Brasher and Rodriguez utilize two different methods and explore two different religious communities, they each highlight a tradition that emphasizes distinct gender roles, inscribes male patriarchal rule, and marginalizes the experiences of women. Because of this, we need to be especially critical of the ways each scholar articulates gendered relationship to power in the lives of their female subjects. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will compare and contrast Brasher and Rodriguez's accounts of gender, paying special attention to the ways they address relationships of power. I will utilize insights provided by the sociologist, Mary Jo Neitz as a guideline for uncovering power in research of women's lives. My comparison will provide an outline for the

problems with the rational choice account of agency. In addition to noting objections presented by feminist scholars (Blank, Nelson, Risman and Ferree), I will demonstrate that a rational choice account of women's agency is problematic for several reasons: it does not articulate multiple forms of oppression; it reinforces subordination rather than challenges it; it re-institutes hierarchical relationships by solidifying gendered relationships to power; and it does not distinguish between individual power for and power over others.

Fundamentalist Women and Gender: The Sacred Canopy

In Brasher's analysis, gender acts as a knife that splits her congregations in two. She observes two identical scenarios but for the fact that women meet in one arena and men in another.

Gender functions as a sacred partition that literally bifurcates the congregation in two, establishing parallel religious worlds: a general symbolic world led by men that encompasses overall congregational life and a second, female symbolic world composed of and led solely by women. (Brasher 4-5)

Her theme seems to be, separate but equal. While men control the overall activities of Bay Chapel and Mount Olive, Brasher finds separate organizations that provide women with autonomy and congregational power. In each congregation there are separate and extensive women's ministries programs that are organized by women and tailored to women's needs. They include Bible studies, retreats, outreach programs to local prisons, and several monthly social gatherings. More than their outward titles and appearances, these programs provide women with opportunities to connect with other women, gain access to leadership, and act collectively to influence the powerful male church hierarchy.

Brasher concludes that women's ministry programs are successful because they perform a necessary service: they empower women. "Within the congregation, their women-only activities and events create and sustain a special symbolic world, parallel to the general one but empowering to fundamentalist women" (Brasher 5). Fundamentalist women find not only comfort and community within their all-female enclaves, but also opportunities to act. Women are able to rise to authoritative positions, teaching and counseling other women. They also respond to crises in other women's lives. During her time spent with Bay Chapel women, Brasher observed Bible study members responding to emotional and physical domestic abuse. When confronted with an abusive husband, Bible study members dropped their religious topic of the day and instead, devised plans for moving an abused wife out of her house (Brasher 15).

Surely the women of Brasher's study find authority, comfort, and community within their all-female enclaves. However, Brasher's analysis of these women's religious experience is problematic. Her reliance on a rational choice theory does not allow for a full exploration of gender dynamics in the congregations she studies. Although Brasher highlights a female community, she does not adequately address gender as a relationship to power. By drawing on Mary Jo Neitz's vision of an alternate, feminist analysis of religious experience, I identify issues in Brasher's account. Brasher does not notice how men and women's relationship to submission is gendered. Brasher does not address two types of power at work in gendered relationships; as a consequence, she reproduces hierarchical power based within patriarchal rule rather than challenges it.

Throughout her analysis, Brasher is aware of the power differential between men and women within fundamentalism. However, she explains away these gendered relationships to power by emphasizing mutual submission. She claims that relationships between men and women are not oppressive because submission within fundamentalism is mutual. Women embrace patriarchal theology and submit to men, their husbands, and church leadership because within the fundamentalist worldview, men submit back. They head the church, home, and community, but in doing so assume sacred responsibility and care for those under their protection. Submission colors all gendered relationships, from the administrative positions within church business, to the everyday interactions of husbands and wives. Brasher claims that rather than induce male rule, submission works toward balance, and rather than create male privilege, submission encourages male responsibility.

Though fundamentalist women insistently claimed that the proper relationship between a woman and her husband is one of submission, they consistently declare that this submission is done out of obedience to God not them and is supposed to be mutual, a relational norm observed by both spouses rather than the capitulation of one to the other. (Brasher 6)

Brasher agrees that marital and organizational submission can be beneficial to women. While fundamentalist women interpret patriarchal rule as a shared responsibility between the sexes, Brasher believes that the emphasis on mutual submission allows men and women to pursue marginal equality. Brasher characterizes submission as “a tactical approach employed by both husband and wife to encourage more just interactions than their parents had” (Brasher 163-164). Within Brasher’s rational choice analysis, submission is a calculated cost that leads to perceived benefits. Like her fundamentalist

subjects, Brasher emphasizes mutual submission within her text in order to illuminate the ways fundamentalist women profit from rational, cost/benefit analysis.

However, Brasher does not address that submission is always, already gendered. Neitz helps us to illuminate this problem. According to Neitz, women and men experience submission differently. Neitz observes that submission as a virtue emerges in the narratives of religious men like St. Augustine. Although women and men both seek the surrender of the self, or experiences of "otherness" brought on by submission, Neitz recognizes that men's submission differs from women's. Basing her argument on the psychoanalytic work of Nancy Chodorow, Neitz claims that men, unlike women, have preexisting autonomy. From Chodorow, Neitz learns that patterns of parental supervision which feature present mothers and absent fathers, affect boy and girl children's notions of self. Boys develop autonomous, separate selves whereas girls establish connected selves based on their proximity to the mother (Neitz "Gender" 395).

From these observations, Neitz theorizes that dominant religious paradigms that emphasize submission do not fit within women's experiences. Submission narratives within religion do not recognize the different modes of autonomy between men and women. Submission tales assume that autonomous individuals give up freedom and power in order to live more attuned to God's will. However, this perspective assumes freedom and autonomy as a foundation for religious conversion.

A feminist perspective forces us to ask whether a story that assumes autonomy as the starting point and then suggests that the outcome of religious experience is a wholeness that comes from pursuing a kind of disciplining of the will is equally appropriate for males and females in our culture. (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 523)

Because women do not establish, autonomous, disconnected individuality like men, religious submission does not signify the same sacrifice for men that it does for women. Instead, narratives of women's submission within religion merely reestablish their subordination to men. In the end, Neitz suggests we move away from the surrender/submission model because it has the potential to create "saintly masochism" among women ("Feminist Theory" 524).

Although submission is the predominant relationship between men and women, Brasher believes that women are able to gain some authority. In spite of the strict lines drawn among the community, Brasher believes that women are able to gain access to authority through separate female spaces. However, she notices that these positions are limited. Congregational perceptions about gender not only distinguish what sorts of positions women may hold, but also color their actions. Brasher illustrates this clearly, distinguishing between "preaching" and "teaching." Although both men and women evangelize during church services, men's public speaking is interpreted as preaching whereas women's public speech is interpreted as teaching.

When a woman preaches (gives the main religious message at a community event), her speech activity is described as 'teaching,' and attendance at the event is limited to only women. When a man preaches (gives the main religious message) at a community event, his speech activity is designated 'preaching,' and both women and men can attend..." (Brasher 63-64)

The distinction between preaching and teaching illustrates differing ways power works within fundamentalist communities. Institutional and individual powers are both present.

Although Brasher articulates fundamentalist women's power to act, she does not detect the institutional power men hold over women. Again, Neitz gives us some insight

into the power structures at work within gender. She claims that any inquiry into women's religious experience needs to address the individual *and* institutional levels of power. We must note both individual women's power *to* act, but also we must expose institutional power *over* women. Neitz believes that in order to truly uncover women's religious experience, we need to articulate both of these types of power:

we need to use both definitions of power and to examine how religion provides legitimacy for control over others (especially women) as well as how religion provides legitimacy for acting autonomously (again, especially for women)." (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 531)

Because religion can be used to both control and empower women, researchers must be particular about the type of freedom women obtain. While women may discover religious avenues that enable individual action, they also may be tightly restricted within institutional control.

There is certainly a power structure underlying fundamentalist authority. Women may access it, within groups of other women, by establishing relationships with powerful men. While Brasher claims to create a gendered analysis of fundamentalist power, her study is by no means exhaustive. Although she describes different types of power granted to women, she does not clearly articulate the structural differences in power accorded to men. Instead, she masks these differences by emphasizing women's personal relationships to Christ.

Brasher describes the varieties of power women at Bay Chapel and Mount Olive attain. She distinguishes between achieved power, the power allotted to women who are employed by church organizations (Brasher 69), and ascribed power, the power brought on by women's sanctioned relationships with authoritative men (Brasher 74). However,

Brasher dismisses the structural differences in men and women's power by championing personal relationships to Christ. She claims that the hierarchy of the church does not concern the women of her study; instead, Brasher stresses individual relationships within fundamentalism, namely the relationship between women and the Lord. Take for example, Julie of Bay Chapel. Importantly, her relationship with the Lord takes priority over institutional influence and tradition.

Religion is what messes up religions. They bring their own doctrine that isn't in the Bible. If you don't see it in the Bible, then where does it come from? . . . My (former) religion stopped me from learning the truth, because it was religious.
(Brasher 81)

Brasher downplays institutional male authority by calling attention to the importance of women's personal relationships with the Lord.

According to Brasher, Bay Chapel and Mount Olive women mitigate the power given to the privileged male elite by emphasizing their personal relationships to Christ. Within fundamentalism, Brasher believes, it is women's relationship to the Lord that is important, not hierarchical status. "To fundamentalist women, salvation is not mediated by religion (which includes religious institutions and the rituals they offer) but by and through a personal relationship with Christ" (Brasher 81). Individual rapport, although based on the opportunities within church organizations, is not dependent upon the fundamentalist church. It is based on an individual's personal relationship to the Lord. This personal appeal, according to Brasher, buffers women from male authority. It situates power within individuals rather than institutions.

This (personal relationship) establishes a norm that limits the import and power women should concede to any other aspect of their religious life, including a pastor, who, this key theological precept indicates, is not a necessary mediator.

Thus, it is a theological idea that can and at times does militate against the sexist impact on female fundamentalists of male domination of the pastorate. (Brasher 81)

In Brasher's analysis, personal relationships with the Lord protect women from patriarchal institutions.

But, as we have already discovered, a patriarchal institution is already in place. It is evidenced in the ways women gain limited authority based upon their relationships with powerful men. Most of the time, access to positions of female power is limited to women who have preexisting relationships with influential men. However, Brasher effectively obscures the organizational framework of power by stressing the importance of individual relationships. Rather than uncover a patriarchal framework of power, she conceals it by emphasizing individual, rather than sociological organizations.

Focusing on the individual rather than the institutional level of experience is indicative of a rational choice framework. Rational choice theorists emphasize the personal in order to support claims about agency and action of specific individuals instead of groups. In order to support their claim that human behavior is driven by cost/benefit analysis, theorists stress the particular rather than the general. Although it is often important to uncover the particularities of experience when studying women's lives, an emphasis on personal belief, behavior, and motivations conceals larger sociological patterns of power. Underscoring personal relationships with the Lord establishes women's individuality while denying the ways the women of Brasher's study *share* this occurrence not as individuals but as women.

While several critics of rational choice theory note that an emphasis on personal experience conceals structural components of power (Bruce and Zafirovski), obscuring institutional power is especially troubling in feminist analysis. While Brasher certainly focuses her research on fundamentalist women, the way Brasher utilizes gender as a framework for analysis is problematic. Although she distinguishes between men and women's spaces, authority, and community, she does not address the relationships of power implicit in gender. If anything, she views gender in terms of sexual categorization only, in terms of male and female. Missing from this description are historical, cultural, and psychological links to autonomy, subjectivity, and freedom. Gender is not a static biological fact; rather, gender is a constantly renegotiated relationship to institutionalized and personal power. Throughout her analysis, Brasher does not note the ways women's power is distinguishable from men's. She does not discern the ways submission is already gendered. Neither does she articulate the multi-dimensions of power and the institutional framework of hierarchical authority. Because of these things, Brasher does not delve into the truly gendered relationships of men and women at Mount Olive and Bay Chapel.

Catholic Mexican-American Women and Gender: Marginalized Group Experience and Power

Within her study, Rodriguez situates her subjects within history, culture, and power. Her approach is distinguished from Brasher's in three respects. Unlike Brasher, Rodriguez addresses gendered experience as group experience. She also situates multiple forms of oppression within her analysis in order to, finally, connect popular religion with

institutionalized power. Because Rodriguez connects women's experience to power through a shared history and culture, she is able to address gender in terms of identity as well as in terms of relationships to institutionalized power. As Rodriguez shows, articulating the social, cultural, and historical relationships to power within the negotiation of gender is important for marginalized groups because revealing power within the context of gender more accurately describes women's experiences and also makes it possible for narratives to emerge that situate women's agency within resistance to these forces.

According to Rodriguez, women's experiences are not predominantly unique to individual women but are shared as a group. This does not mean that among any group of Mexican-American women there are no varied experiences. Although they may have social, economic, and familial differences, Rodriguez identifies some elements that bind these women together including religiosity, acculturation, and marginalization. Shared characteristics emerge out of a history of cultural oppression. Rodriguez traces Mexican-American women's particular group experience to conquest. As a twice-conquered people, once by the Spanish conquistadors and once by the United States army, Mexican-American women's experiences must be understood in terms of the psychosocial effects of devastation and powerlessness.

Whether these women are conscious or not of their legacy of colonization and oppression is not relevant; historical events have an effect whether we are conscious of them or not. The impact of systematic marginalization on Mexican-American women is that they find themselves in positions of no control over those institutions which influence them. (Rodriguez 126)

The devastating effects of continual colonization have influenced Mexican-American identity. As a twice-conquered group, Rodriguez believes that Mexican-American women share, at their core, a heritage of political and personal powerlessness. The deciding factor for Mexican-American identity then, for Rodriguez, is not individual autonomy, but rather systematic group oppression.

That Rodriguez highlights group experience and Brasher does not is one of the central differences between Rodriguez and Brasher's studies. Because Brasher emphasizes individuality among women, individual religious experiences with religiosity, and individual relationships to the Lord, she conceals the similarities among the women in her study based on their shared gender status in their congregation. Her study does not address the ways women experience the world in a similarly gendered way. On the other hand, Rodriguez explicitly insures a gendered analysis of women's experience. She calls the Mexican-American experience, "la realidad" in order to note the psychosocial history at any given moment in personal experience (Rodriguez 62). Although there are independent factors at work in women's lives Mexican-American women connect through the interpretive framework of their group history.

As a particular blend of Spanish and indigenous Indian heritage, Rodriguez believes that Our Lady of Guadalupe is central to understanding the Mexican-American women for two reasons. As an experience, image, and story, Guadalupe speaks to the cultural identity of Mexican-American women. Because religion is central to human experience, religious themes must be incorporated into inquiries into identity (Rodriguez 47). Rodriguez details the complicated ways in which Mexican-American women relate

to Guadalupe. Guadalupe's image reflects back to women a complex cultural heritage. She is tied to two religious cultures: Spanish Catholicism and goddess worship by the indigenous Nahautl people. Because of Guadalupe's association with two worldviews, she reflects back to Mexican-American women an influential image ripe with cultural contradictions. Rodriguez notes that religion predominates in both cultural heritages, Nahautl and Catholic. Because Guadalupe is tied to Mexican-American distinctiveness through religious heritage and contradictions in female identity, religion must be incorporated in an analysis of Mexican-American women.

Religion is not separate from those human characteristics that constitute the psychosocial dimension, but rather considers all those characteristics in relation to whatever one may consider the divine. (Rodriguez 47)

Rodriguez's lens for analysis, a psychosocial framework, ties religion to identity, and religious culture to the divine. Because of this, Rodriguez is able to show the ways religion, as a worldview, bridges group and individual identity.

While Rodriguez creates a comprehensive portrait of Mexican-American group experience, within her analysis she also addresses multiple forms of oppression at work in Mexican-American women's lives. She claims that the Mexican-American woman is subjected to three forms of oppression: general sexism, historical group subordination, and sexism within Mexican-American culture (Rodriguez 64). In order to recognize these forms of oppression, she looks throughout history. Several periods of colonization by the Spanish and the United States resulted in religious and gendered subordination. However, the second colonization was especially traumatic. It was an internal

colonization that has left Mexican-American women powerless. Although they maintain legal equality, they have no control over a system that has immediate control over them.

What makes the experience of Mexican Americans unique compared to all the other ethnic populations that migrated to this country is their psychohistorical experience and their subsequent subjugation – all taking place in what the indigenous people considered to be their own land. (Rodriguez 69)

According to Rodriguez, sexism compounds this historical colonization. She claims that Mexican-American women are doubly oppressed, as both a colonized group and as women.

Although Rodriguez identifies multiple forms of oppression at work in women's lives, she is still able to discover empowerment. Ultimately, she finds that women's relationship to Our Lady of Guadalupe is built upon their own limitations.

The story, belief, image, and cultural memory of Our Lady of Guadalupe help Mexican-American women to envision a different world. In Christian terminology, it is an eschatological experience. In this experience, the marginalized have a special relationship with God, one which is especially meaningful for the people who have no other relationship with anything powerful in this world. (Rodriguez 139)

This relationship, although based within oppression, is a means to empowerment. For example, Carolina, a married Mexican-American woman, thinks of Guadalupe as a link to submission *and* empowerment. She thinks of Guadalupe's submission as both a pain and a promise to overcome oppression.

When I see the image I feel a lot of pain. . . There is a lot of pain and a lot of submissiveness. Maybe that's why Mexican mothers and families gather around to pray to her. . . I guess they identify with her because she understands everything that they are going through, and it seems like they don't get enough credit for what they're doing, and only Our Lady of Guadalupe knows what they are going through and what their goals are: trying to raise a family and trying to accomplish something. (Rodriguez 134)

For Carolina, Guadalupe reflects both submissive pain and unacknowledged struggle. Guadalupe, in this way, enables women to cope with the layers of oppression built into their experience but also allows for outright empowerment to emerge. Rodriguez allows women like Carolina to acknowledge their subordination and then utilize the image of Guadalupe to overcome that powerlessness.

Similarly, Monica envisions a life for her daughter that is transformed through her devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Although Guadalupe is often seen as submissive, Monica notes that she is strong. "I would love for my daughter to be growing up being herself, modest, strong, intelligent, beautiful" (Rodriguez 131). Rodriguez is aware of the contradictions between powerlessness and control, yet, in her analysis of Mexican-American women she identifies both.

Coupling women's capacity with incapacity is another way in which Rodriguez's study differs from Brasher's. Empowerment within oppression situates the subject within her social world without limiting agency. The problem with Brasher's use of rational choice is that freedom is (and has to be) assumed in order to grant choice. Rodriguez's study of Guadalupe, on the other hand, notes female oppression. Yet, she envisions agency within resistance.

Mexican-American women are still able to find ways of consciously or unconsciously resisting assimilation and total annihilation by the dominant culture. They do this by attempting to maintain their cultural values and forming complex relationships – interdependent, extended-family relationships. (Rodriguez 76)

Rather than build a relationship with the divine and others based on submission, Rodriguez bases women's relationship to Guadalupe within resistance to colonization, sexism, assimilation, and powerlessness.

In order to situate agency within resistance Rodriguez uncovers also a distinction between popular and institutionalized religion. Ultimately, the difference has to do with access to institutional power. Groups that enact popular forms of religion do not have access to organized power. Because of this, popular religion reflects the worldview and experiences of the poor and marginalized. Rodriguez claims that popular religion "continues to exist because for the poor and marginalized it is a source of power, dignity, and acceptance not found in the institutional church" (144). Popular religion, as a source of authority for marginalized groups, not only explains its appeal, but also ties it to the pursuit of autonomy and subjectivity through resistance.

Another difference between Brasher and Rodriguez's accounts of women's religious experience is that Rodriguez notes the ties between institutional power and religion. She recognizes the power of institutional authority to legitimize religious acts and beliefs. Brasher, on the other hand, does not recognize the presence of institutionalized authority within her fundamentalist communities. Because of this, she does not distinguish between power to control one's self and institutional power over others. However, as Rodriguez notes the ways Mexican-American women utilize the symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe to resist oppression, she ties this use to liberation theology.

Liberation theology claims that it is the sacred duty of religion to overcome oppression of the disenfranchised. According to Rodriguez,

it is not a theology created by the intelligentsia, the affluent, or the powerful, but by the poor and oppressed. It is a theology that believes in a God of history, that believes that God is active and present in the world, and that it is not enough that the hearts and minds of women and men be converted, but that the very structures that perpetuate systems of injustice must enter a similar conversion process. (148-9)

With the tenets of liberation theology in mind, we can see more clearly that an effect of Brasher's rational choice account of agency is civic irresponsibility. Because it stresses personal conversion, the choice to abide by a specific theological framework, rational choice does not address the cultural embeddedness of religion or its ties to institutionalized oppression. Rational choice posits that autonomously free individual actors choose to abide by the conditions of religious doctrine in order to gain material benefits. Because autonomy is tied to the individual, rather than the institution, a rational choice analysis is not capable of connecting systematic oppression with popular religion.

By contrast, Rodriguez's psychosocial framework not only situates women and religion within culture, but also creates a space for both of them to respond to injustice. Our Lady of Guadalupe is an example of liberation theology. Many church officials do not accept the validity of the Guadalupe event and refuse to display her image, even in congregations with large Hispanic populations. Because she represents the oppressed and disenfranchised in a very real way, Guadalupe alters the power relationships between colonizers and colonized. She is a symbol of Mexican defiance of acculturation and because of this, challenges the authorizing power of institutionalized religion (Rodriguez 144).

Conclusion: Gender, Power, and Choice

Although both Rodriguez and Brasher elucidate women's religious experiences, only Rodriguez sufficiently describes the effects of gender on women's lives. Brasher's use of rational choice theory does not adequately address gender as a relationship to power. She emphasizes submission without recognizing the ways in which it is already gendered. She does not address the limits to women's authority through institutionalized control. And she bases female autonomy within an already existent, powerful, male hierarchy. Because of these things, Brasher does not clearly articulate female experience of agency. Throughout her analysis she utilizes gender to describe the distinctions between men and women's spaces, but does not address the ways gender shapes women's worldview.

On the other hand, Rodriguez identifies a lived, group experience of Mexican-American women based on history, culture, and identity. She incorporates multiple forms of oppression into her analysis. Finally, she recognizes the influence of institutionalized authority within religion. Because of these differences, Rodriguez is able to attend to gender not merely as a relationship between men and women, but more importantly, as one of many relationships to power. Although Brasher appears to grant agency to fundamentalist women in the face of oppression, she does so only by masking the ways men and women access power differently. In order to truly identify sites of empowerment, researchers need to uncover power dynamics in women's lives. Only then may they fully articulate women's gendered experience and allow for tales of resistance to emerge.

In addition to the objections of feminist scholars already noted, the rational choice account of agency Brasher employs is problematic for a further reason: it does not address gender as a relationship to power. Disregarding the dimensions of power within gender is dangerous when describing women's religious experience for four reasons. First, it conceals the role of patriarchy in limiting women's access to power. Rather than link individual subordination with societal, patriarchal regulation, Brasher focuses exclusively on fundamentalist women's personal relationships with men and authority. Although critics of rational choice have previously noted that rational choice theory conceals institutional action (Bruce and Zafirovski), they have not identified why this is especially problematic when theorists attempt to articulate gender. Because rational choice theory does not distinguish between individual and institutional power, the power *for* and power *over* others, it conceals patriarchal control of women.

As rational choice theory disguises the ways gender organizes women's experience, it also obscures patriarchal control. In an attempt to identify women's agency, rational choice theorists, like Brasher, endeavor to discover ways in which women tap into male authority. For example, Brasher uncovers authority in the role of pastor's wife. However, her assessment is problematic because it builds women's power upon an already existent, yet unnamed male authority. Although Brasher attempts to identify spaces of female power, because she refuses to also name male privilege, she disguises the role of patriarchy at work in women's lives.

Secondly, rational choice theory reinforces women's subordination rather than challenges it. Because it emphasizes individual rather than group experience, rational

choice theory does not connect individual and organizational oppression. It mistakenly portrays all women as independent and autonomous actors. Viewing women as perpetual victims can also be dangerous; however, because rational choice theory does not recognize the shared experiences of women, it disguises the ways women, as a group, are subjugated. Rational choice theorists like Brasher emphasize personal relationships between women, men, and the Lord. In doing so, they deny the ways women's experience is created through gender and a shared relationship to power. Although women act under a variety of conditions and may become autonomous, rational choice's emphasis on individual rather than group behavior denies women's shared subjugation.

Third, rational choice theory strengthens hierarchical relationships between men and women by solidifying contemporary gendered relations to power. Although gender is often perceived as a static distinction between men and women, masculinity and femininity, gender is a dynamic process that changes over place and time. It must always be viewed as a relationship among men and women to power. However, rational choice theory does not present gender within an historical or sociological framework. Brasher ahistoricizes gender by neglecting historical and sociological influences to women's lives. As a consequence, the theory fixes the current gendered organizations of power into place. This is problematic because rational choice does not create opportunities for women to overcome marginalization. Instead, the theory justifies women's subordination by denying the ways gender emerges, changes, and presents opportunities for transformation within specific places and times.

Finally, because rational choice theory emphasizes individual experience, it does not articulate multiple forms of oppression at work in women's lives. Overlooking the complexities of oppression is problematic because it does not identify the ways other relationships to power affect women's experience. Race, class, sexuality, and certainly gender each contribute to individual women's experience. Yet, because it does not make ties to institutional power, rational choice theory eliminates sociological oppression from analysis. Brasher does not address multiple forms of oppression within her analysis. She conceals the effects of organizing frameworks such as race, class, and sexuality, by stressing women's personal relationships to the Lord. Overlooking oppression is especially troubling within the academic study of religion because theories like rational choice do not make connections between institutional religion and power. Once we notice the ties between race, class, sexuality, gender, and religion, we find that religion too is a relationship to power. Religion authorizes experience through an appeal to normative categories and establishes control over religious subjects. As a continuation of frameworks like race, class, and gender, in an analysis of religion we must be conscious of the overlapping privileges of power.

Unfortunately, because Brasher does not construct gender as a relationship to power, she is not able to truly articulate agency in fundamentalist women's lives. Although she does present groups of women, acting in order to influence male authority, she does not uncover the sociological organization of power. Rather than uncover agency, her reliance on rational choice theory conceals the conditions that gender women's lives. In order to truly identify agency within religion we need to be suspicious

of the ways rational choice theory appears to grant freedom. Although choice is an important component *of* freedom, it should not be criteria *for* freedom. Instead, we need to address the ways power works to limit experience at the same time as it creates opportunities for resistance, and boldly situate agency *within* oppression as a legitimate response to tyranny.

As an instructive alternative, Rodriguez's account of agency is preferred above Brasher's. Unlike Brasher, Rodriguez addresses women's gendered experience as continually negotiated relationships to power. Because she focuses on women's group experience, she is able to make connections between multiple forms of oppression. This allows her to connect institutionalized religion with power. Because Rodriguez connects women's experience to power through a shared history and culture, she is able to address gender in terms of identity as well as in terms of relationships to institutionalized power. As Rodriguez shows, articulating social, cultural, and historical relationships to power is important for marginalized groups because it more accurately describes their experiences and also makes it possible for narratives to emerge that situate agency within resistance to these forces. These insights into religious studies provide a fuller picture of religious life, and more importantly, present opportunities for transformation of the field. In identifying power within religious inquiry, scholars may be inclined also to break down the subject/object relationship within religious studies, become aware of the authorization of religious experience through academic study, and reorient the Protestant bias in religious studies by conceding the importance of popular religion.

CHAPTER 4

EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

Throughout this thesis, I have examined Brasher and Rodriguez's accounts of women's religious experience. In the previous chapter, I argued that any account of women's agency needs to observe gender as a relationship to power. In doing so, researchers more clearly articulate women's experiences and also make way for real agency. Another central aspect to women's experience is the body. In a way, bodies are the gateway to experience. The body plays a central role in identity, subjectivity, and autonomy. The role of embodiment in agency is similar to that of gender. In articulating a perspective on the body, scholars achieve a more accurate portrayal of women's experience at the same time as they make way for agency within resistance. The body plays a role in agency by impacting self-identification, revealing action, and solidifying community. For human beings, the body is the primary tool through which to discover and orient the world. The body is also the means through which we communicate and build mutuality among others.

When researchers approach the body from a perspective grounded in religious studies, they become aware of the affective components of religion. Although emotions are certainly an important aspect of religious experience, the body works within religion in other ways to orient, act, and bridge the gap between self and others. Throughout this chapter, I will juxtapose the presence of the body in Rodriguez's study with its absence in Brasher's text, in order to demonstrate that it is important to recognize the body in accounts of women's religious agency.

Although critics of rational choice theory often claim that rational choice bypasses key features of human behavior because the theory does not account for non-rational religious action (Zafirovski), these critics rarely comment on rational choice's inattention to the body itself. At its most basic, rational choice theory emphasizes belief; therefore, it downplays the effects of embodiment. In fact, there is no evidence that rational choice theorists consider the body at all in their analysis of behavior. Rational choice merely addresses the material "needs" and "goals" of an individual: food, clothing, or shelter for example. These needs are a consequence of embodied living; however, rational choice does not begin to uncover the ways the body is implicated in these needs and goals. Rather than articulate embodied experience, rational choice theory features a disembodied, intellectual decision maker, uninhibited by gender, history, and culture. Ultimately, the absence of bodies in rational choice analysis is problematic because it solidifies mind/body distinctions within Christianity. It also conceals women's religious actions rather than reveals them. For these reasons, I have found alternatives to rational choice appealing. Orienting women within a lived experience of the body allows theorists to attribute agency to women's deeds of defiance to the limitations placed upon them by history, culture, and gender. In the end, writing the body into an analysis of women's experience uncovers female action.

The Body and Orientation

Although it is difficult to locate a body to address within Brasher's study, by comparing and contrasting certain elements of Brasher and Rodriguez's texts, such as conversion narratives, accounts of women's action, and relationships with others, I will

show that any account of women's agency needs to incorporate the lived experience of the body. Brasher and Rodriguez both investigate women's conversion narratives. The expansive account of the body in Rodriguez's study offers emphatic testimony to the way that the body orients experience. The orienting effects of the body can be seen most clearly in Brasher's account of conversion. That Brasher does not write about the body is shown in stark relief when I compare Brasher and Rodriguez's conversion narratives. By stressing personal choice, Brasher gives us an account of disembodied conversion.

Rodriguez, on the other hand, creates an account of embodied conversion.

Throughout her text, Rodriguez identifies ways the body acts as a catalyst for conversion among the indigenous Nahuatl people of the past and Mexican-American women of the present. She claims that the image, symbol, and story of Our Lady of Guadalupe entices Nahuatl men and women not only to embrace Christianity, but also, and more important, to build an intimate relationship with Guadalupe.

The description makes clear that the image is not simply a picture, but a story made up of a number of symbols which spoke to the Nahuatl people in the sixteenth-century and still speak to twentieth-century people. (Rodriguez 30)

Symbols such as her face, hands, pregnancy, numerology, and celestial signs align Guadalupe with the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin.

However, Guadalupe's olive complexion, a reflection of their own bodies, leads the Nahuatl and contemporary Mexican-American women to a powerful connection with her.

The symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe has had various manifestations: it affirmed the humanness of the indigenous populations, it provided a symbolic means of

forging a new culture and polity out of Spanish and Indian elements, and today it serves to bring together disparate groups who otherwise would never know one another. (Rodriguez 46)

Not merely her tale, message, or symbolism connects Guadalupe with Mexican-American women, but the reflection of their bodies, tanned, pregnant, and female, brings women to her. This connection is exemplified by Carolina who claims, "'Our Lady of Guadalupe' she is everyone's Lady of Guadalupe as to say she is the mother of the world or a Mexican Mother waiting, caring, unselfish" (Rodriguez 106). Women like Carolina forge a particular connection with Guadalupe through her reflection of the Mexican, female form.

Women's self-identification with Guadalupe is not merely an emotional connection; it also is a symbolic connection that orients women in the world. For the Nahuatl people, Guadalupe originally reoriented them in a world dominated by Spanish colonizers. The defeat of the Aztec people was closely associated with Nahuatl prophecies predicting the end of the world. With their gods and society utterly defeated, Nahuatl men and women had no way of relating to their new world. However, once Guadalupe appeared, she forged a connection between the utterly defeated Aztec gods and the new foreign god of Christianity. "In the sixteenth century, the Virgin of Guadalupe came to be a symbol of the new Indian Catholicism as distinguished from the foreign Catholicism of the conquerors" (Rodriguez 45). By combining mythology and symbolism from both religions, Our Lady of Guadalupe ushered in a new worldview that placed the conquistadors and indigenous peoples within the same picture.

Similarly, in contemporary Mexican-American experience, Guadalupe reorients women from traditional notions of womanhood to those of contemporary female empowerment. Monica, one of the women interviewed by Rodriguez, claims,

Some people think that Our Lady of Guadalupe is sort of passive and submissive and qualities that are, you know, that especially being a Latino and being in the United States, you don't want to be like that anymore. . . I'm going to try hard to raise my daughter the way it should be, the right way, you know, not growing up around whatever is happening, you know..." (Rodriguez 131)

Monica utilizes the image of Guadalupe to orient herself in her surroundings. As a Latino woman she not only conflates Guadalupe with herself but also uses her as a staging point from which to challenge her world and defy feminine passivity.

Like Rodriguez, Brasher also investigates conversion narratives. Whereas conversion plays an orienting role in Rodriguez's tale, Brasher emphatically distinguishes between conversion and reorientation. Brasher notes that although most of her women had experiences with Christianity in the past, she believes that were she to describe their moves to fundamentalism as reorientation she would not adequately address the amount of energy this new commitment required. "It would relativize the amount of change in the women's lives that the conversion process stimulated and unwarrantedly contradict as well the rationale they offered for their own behaviors" (Brasher 36). By becoming "born again," every aspect of their lives has changed. This intra-faith conversion is important to Brasher; it underscores each woman's conscious decision to embrace the Christian faith and a new relationship with the Lord. Because Brasher emphasizes the religious change brought on by conversion, she ties conversion closely to a rational

choice. "Intrafaith conversion could also be construed as a highly rational choice: it is a maximizing behavior that allows believers to 'conserve on the value of their previous religious investments'" (Brasher 37). Brasher uses these narratives to establish choice within conversion of fundamentalist women.

Beth, a Mount Olive woman, exemplifies Brasher's disembodied fundamentalist conversion. Beth had been a Christian all her life, becoming "born again" only nine years before speaking with Brasher. According to Beth, what has transformed in her life in that time are not her lifestyle, deeds, or acts, but rather, her thoughts. "My life has slowly changed through the years since then. I'm still the same person; but my thoughts, my opinions, my contentment with myself is so different" (Brasher 35). According to Brasher, central to conversion is the conscious decision to embrace a new relationship with the Lord. Similarly, Kris from Bay Chapel recalled her conversion as a single event: an informational booth at her university drew Kris into Christian fundamentalism. "I went up to the booth. When I got up there I told them I wanted to know God. I remember I went back and told my boyfriend, and he laughed at me" (Brasher 43). Kris's conversion was signified by a choice to seek out information.

What can be made of these differences in Brasher and Rodriguez's accounts of conversion? Rodriguez writes the body into her text and connects conversion with orientation, while Brasher overlooks the body and disconnects the two. Are these simply two different reporting styles? Does it matter whether researchers write the body into religious experience? In, "Feminist Theory and Religious Practices," Mary Jo Neitz claims that a revaluation of the body is important for all religious experiences but

especially important for women. Christianity emphasizes a mind/body distinction. The mind represents the soul and is aligned with the true self. Its main obstacle is to overcome the sins of the body: greed, lust, and gluttony, to name a few. However, this mind/body distinction is also gendered: men are aligned with the rational mind while women are tied to the emotional body. Because women's bodies are associated with sin and death in the Christian tradition, they are vilified. Instead, Neitz argues that we must free up such association.

While much of the religious literature has described the body as an impediment to religious experience, with women's bodies in particular the site of temptation and sin, we can also find places where the body is the route to the religious experience. (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 528)

Neitz suggests we uncover female symbols of the divine that also celebrate the body. For example, "The Goddess symbols carry a vision of life that is cyclic rather than linear; cycles of birth and death, cycles of ovulation and menstruation are invested with a renewed sanctity" (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 527). By associating sanctity, divinity, and life with the female body, researchers may revive feminine symbols and reward the female body rather than punish it. They break down mind/body distinctions within Christianity and begin to write the body into accounts of religious experience.

By stressing disembodied conversion driven by choice, Brasher solidifies the mind/body dichotomy within Christianity. As a Western Christian tradition, mind/body distinctions are already present in the Bay Chapel and Mount Olive religious framework. Like other Protestant groups, fundamentalists privilege the spiritual self over the body. "Privileging believers' minds over their bodies, the dominant rituals of overall congregational life encourage a mind/body split..." (Brasher 102). Based upon early

European and other patriarchal cultures, women are aligned with the body, emotion, sin, and death, while men are associated with the mind, rationality, spirit, and salvation.

As Neitz proposes, scholars may only dispute these misogynistic beliefs by situating positive religious experience within the female body. Brasher does not. She emphasizes the spiritual realm of identity to the exclusion of the body. However, Brasher notes that although the general congregation emphasizes the mind/body split, within the all-female enclaves, this divide is decidedly muted.

in the female enclaves this hierarchy of ideas over feelings vanishes. Sacred life in the female enclaves of both congregations revolves around a dialectic of religious ideas and experiences, thereby encouraging a mind/body integration. (Brasher 102)

What can be made of the dissonance between the congregational mind/body split and mind/body integration in women's Bible study groups? Certainly women are aware their connection with the body. As Brasher asks women to explain inherent differences in men and women, Louise of Mount Olive claims, "Their makeup is different. With guys and girls, what is more important to them differs. Guys are more physical. Women are more emotional" (Brasher 145). Although both adjectives "physical" and "emotional" may be tied to the body, the inference is clear, women are aligned with emotions rather than reason. Disconcertingly, Brasher does not address these decidedly different stances on the mind/body distinction within fundamentalist congregations. Rather than challenge the Christian association between the female body and evil, she neglects to consider whether the association of women with sin might still be functioning. Rational choice supports that neglect.

Rodriguez, on the other hand, challenges these beliefs by forging a connection between the female body and divinity. Granted, Our Lady of Guadalupe, as a female face of the divine, aids in this challenge; however, Rodriguez's use of the body as a tool for conversion allows women to reorient themselves in a patriarchal world. According to Rodriguez, women view the image of Guadalupe, then utilize her figure to re-envision their place in the world. "The virgen de Guadalupe is a lovely lady to me. She plays an important role in my life. She gives me strength. I see in her a strong woman. I would like to be a good mother and have a nice family – she has it all" (Rodriguez 106). Women like Ruth use the reflection of themselves they find in the image of Guadalupe to challenge the restrictions placed on femininity and confront misogyny in their own lives. Because Rodriguez aligns positive religious experiences with the female body, she breaks down restrictive doctrine that allies the female body with evil.

The Body and Action

Scholars need to address the female body in order to challenge the restrictive characteristics associated with traditional femininity, passivity, dependence, and sin; however, this is only one way in which an emphasis on the body creates action. When theorists stress the body within religious experience, they accent action rather than contemplation, ritual rather than belief. Although belief is certainly important in religion, it is not the only interaction humans have with the divine. They light candles, pray, sing, and enter abodes of the heavenly, and, in doing so, they forge new connections with the divine through the material world. Because Brasher exclusively emphasizes belief within her community of women and builds her theory of agency upon it, locating her account of

religious action is challenging. On the other hand, Rodriguez makes religious action central to her account; women of her study act in order to transform the symbol of Guadalupe as well as their own material conditions.

In the past, Marian symbols have been utilized by Christianity to oppress women. When aligning the female form with passivity, stressing female submission, and creating an unrealistic ideal for women as both virgin and mother, Marian symbols have been used to control female action (Rodriguez xviii). Rodriguez claims that although Our Lady of Guadalupe has certainly been used in this way by the Spanish colonizers and Catholic hierarchy, the Mexican-American women of her study actively remake her. As an intercessor between God and women, Guadalupe is a powerful representative for women. She seeks out God's favor and aids women in overcoming hardship.

Just as Our Lady of Guadalupe affirmed Juan Diego in his moments of self-doubt and sense of unworthiness, Mexican-American women find inner strength and conviction to make decisions outside of the domestic sphere. (Rodriguez 165)

What is interesting about this, Rodriguez claims, is that in their reworking of Guadalupe as active, Mexican-American women also recreate themselves as agents able to act in a patriarchal and oppressive culture. Julia claims, "Our Virgin de Guadalupe represents to me everything we as a people should strive to be. Strong yet humble, warm and compassionate yet courageous enough to stand up for what we believe in no matter how tense the pressure" (Rodriguez 107). Even though Guadalupe has been used as a symbol of feminine passivity, Mexican-American women utilize her image to transform their own notions of femininity.

However, Guadalupe not only inspires action, she also requires it. The lighting of candles, prayers, feasts, songs, and rituals required by Catholic piety keeps Guadalupe present in Mexican-American women's daily lives. An example comes from Beatrice: "When I see (Guadalupe's) picture or pray to a statue of her I have I really feel that she hears me and understands what I am saying or feeling" (Rodriguez 106). Because Guadalupe is able to enter into the ebb and flow of everyday life, she teaches women to act physically and symbolically. Rodriguez claims that through their daily interaction with Guadalupe, Mexican-American women engage in active faith. They are continually transforming the symbol of Guadalupe in much the same way as the original apparition transformed ancient Nahuatl symbols and harmonized them with a Christian icon.

As acculturation becomes a fact of life, the exploration and rethinking of the image of Guadalupe can offer a powerful tool for Mexican-American women. Bringing the image and devotion of Our Lady of Guadalupe in line with the new situation of Mexican-American women in the United States is akin to what Guadalupe calls upon Juan Diego to do: take the traditional religious symbol of flowers into a new situation, give it new meaning, and thus transform it. (Rodriguez 164)

Because Guadalupe teaches women to transform her symbol, they are also able to transform themselves. According to Rodriguez then, ritual and religious action makes agency possible. In encountering Guadalupe through religious action, Mexican-American women are able to remake themselves as they constantly revise the Marian symbol.

Rodriguez's account stands in stark contrast to Brasher's. For Brasher, intellectualized decisions are the vehicle for her research subjects' free actions. According to Brasher, fundamentalist women transform themselves in a single

conversional choice. "During conversion, the woman is moved to a different understanding of herself in relation to ultimate values and truths" (Brasher 40). The women's choice is cognitive, it is not definitively expressed in action. Brasher claims, therefore, that choice, rather than acts, propel her subjects to become "Godly women." That is not to say that ritual action is absent in the lives of these women. Brasher claims that in the Mount Olive and Bay Chapel communities, ritual is closely tied to the personal growth movement.

From individualistic, public, confessional conversions to self-authoritative Bible studies, the religious goods of Bay Chapel and Mount Olive are directed to appeal to an audience of individuals interested in drawing upon religious experiences to better their own sense of (generally, psychological) well-being. (Brasher 21)

Rituals are the visible, public articulation of changes that have transpired in women's individual belief and self-awareness. Standing in stark contrast to embodied ritual, Brasher's intellectual account of ritual certainly reflects Protestant emphasis on belief. According to Brasher, women forge a new and lasting relationship with the Lord and this relationship enables fundamentalist women to confront crisis and powerlessness in their lives.

However, Brasher's emphasis on intellectualized relationships begs the question, to what extent is an emphasis on personal relationships with the Lord concealing women's action? Brasher believes that the choice involved in conversion brings healing and empowerment to women. According to her, women convert to fundamentalism in order to overcome oppression, pain, and hardship in their lives. However, Brasher claims for her research subjects, God, rather than women, is the agent that overcomes crisis.

“Importantly, the transformation of self was not identified as a product of the self. It was achieved by God, the Creator” (Brasher 57). Conversion does not provide women with tools in order to challenge their world; rather, conversion allows women to access the Lord who transforms their lives.

Apart from God, the only thing Bay Chapel and Mount Olive women claimed to have achieved was personal devastation. It was only in relationship with God and through the considerable support of their congregation and its female enclaves that these women experienced a quality of life that made it possible for them to endure. (Brasher 57)

In this account, women make the choice to commit to a relationship with God in order for *him* to overcome crisis in their lives. Here, it is God who is acting to overcome oppression and hardship, not the women themselves.

Some readers might argue that Brasher is merely reporting the beliefs of her subjects. Brasher agrees with her subjects' attribution of divine intervention in their lives. Fundamentalist women envision themselves helpless, the Lord works to balance trial in their lives. However, as an inquiry into women's agency, Brasher's account of women's action is problematic. Because of rational choice theory, Brasher is blind to other features of her subjects' lives. A new and lasting relationship with the Lord is the important outcome of conversion. Brasher does not report other ways women, themselves, act to overcome crisis in conversion. She does not pursue other avenues of action because rational choice theory takes for granted that all subjects are already autonomous agents. Brasher does not need to further uncover women's acts because, within rational choice theory, agency is presumed of its subjects. Although presumed

agency often allows rational choice theorists to creatively uncover freedom through choice, in this case, it conceals the way women negotiate crisis in their lives. Because Brasher does not identify the ways women act and react to crisis, she conceals women's deeds, rather than reveals them. Her inquiry into agency is negligent because Brasher attributes agency solely to the Lord, rather than women, themselves. Unlike Rodriguez, who attributes action to the women involved, Brasher's approach conceals the everyday deeds that Bay Chapel and Mount Olive women accomplish in order to negotiate crisis.

Not surprisingly, Neitz suggests that feminist analyses of religion need to express the body in analysis in order to single out religious deeds. She believes that researchers need to move away from what people say and focus instead on the things that they do. Focusing on acts rather than beliefs more accurately reveals the rich complexity of religious experience. For religious studies, this means we need to move away from thinking in terms of rules and beliefs and focus instead on practices. Writing the body into analysis allows researchers to not only detect women's endeavors more easily but also recognize the effects of gender on women's lives. According to Neitz,

focusing on practices rather than on beliefs makes a space for incorporating the body into our analyses. Given that practices are more likely than beliefs to be gendered in observable ways, it gives sociologists of religion new ways for thinking about how gender and sexuality are at the core of religion. ("Gender and Culture" 400)

In order to convey the complexity of religious life and uncover agency, theorists need to identify women's action through an emphasis on the body, rather than conceal women's deeds by stressing a cognitive choice.

Because she utilizes rational choice theory, Brasher avoids going beyond an intellectual description of women's deeds. Although her account of conversion may reflect the beliefs of fundamentalist women, Brasher fails to note the ways women, themselves, act. By stressing belief rather than action, Brasher conceals women's acts rather than reveals them. Her approach is problematic for an account of women's agency. In order to uncover women's agency within religion, scholars need not only articulate vague notions of empowerment but also to credit action to women. Because Brasher exclusively locates action with the Lord, rather than her fundamentalist subjects, she conceals the ways women embrace religion to challenge their lives, therefore, veils women's agency. Rodriguez, on the other hand, reveals women's agency by presenting us with an embodied account of experience. Because she identifies the ways in which ritual plays a central role in religious experience, Rodriguez is able to note the ways Mexican-American women actively remake their world.

The Body and Others

One way in which to act in the world is to forge relationships with others. Through verbal and nonverbal communication, we build community among others each and every day. Relationships with friends, family, and loved ones require personal sacrifice, strength, and willpower. Not only do these relationships depend upon a bodily reaction to others, but also, the types of relationships we forge with others depend on the body that is already gendered. Hierarchical relationships where law and order are passed down through channels of power reflect patriarchal styles of relationships. Patriarchy dictates that power is passed down hierarchically from one man to another. An

alternative to this style of relationship is one in which power is dispersed horizontally. Rather than dominate others, this type of relationship with another allows mutuality and community instead of competition and strife. We can envision an alternative to patriarchal and hierarchal relationships with others, one in which power is shared rather than accumulated.

When researchers look at relationships within religion they need to take into account not only those relationships that people forge among other congregation members but also the relationships they build with the divine. Relationships within Christianity often stress a hierarchical style that is associated with masculine behaviors in contemporary society. God reigns on high while his will and authority is dispersed among humans through a chain of command. In each text, Rodriguez and Brasher articulate relationships to the divine: the Lord and Our Lady of Guadalupe. While Brasher asserts hierarchical, masculine relationships among fundamentalist women, Rodriguez argues for a mutual relationship among her Mexican-American subjects.

Rodriguez claims that relationships forged among Mexican-American women with Guadalupe are reciprocal and mutual rather than weighted and hierarchical.

The relationship that emerges from this religious and cultural transmission of the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe has reciprocity as one of its elements. There's an exchange – something mutual happens. The women pray to her, light candles, and leave flowers before her image, and they believe that she responds.
(Rodriguez 120)

Women build a relationship with Guadalupe through prayer and ritual and Guadalupe acts in response: she reacts, acts as an intercessor to God, and gives back to women.

Yolanda clearly expresses this relationship. Unlike God, she has forged a reciprocal relationship with Guadalupe. "I see that (Guadalupe)'s always been there for me. I've never felt abandoned by her, whereas, other saints perhaps, or Jesus or God I felt...(Rodriguez 116-117). Mexican-American women feel connected with Guadalupe through a reciprocal relationship that does not exist with male symbols like Jesus and God. According to Rodriguez, the assumptive world of her Mexican-American subjects' is built upon their interconnections among other women, mothers, sisters, and daughters. "Complex relationality refers to the way in which women's experience is grounded in interpersonal relations and extends itself even into the realm of divinity" (Rodriguez 115). Women's interconnectedness with Guadalupe extends from their relationships among other women.

Maintaining mutual relationships impacts agency because it is another way in which women act within religion. The women of Rodriguez's study actively remake their relationships to the divine. Rather than rely on hierarchical relationships with Jesus Christ or God, Mexican-American women create new relationships with the holy, they fashion a mutual relationship with Guadalupe that gets tended in everyday life. Take for example Rosio who distinguishes between speaking with Guadalupe and with God. "Well, I pray to the Virgin like I say the "Our Father," but I speak to the Virgin, you know, like as if she's my mother..." (Rodriguez 122). Rosio and other Mexican-American women tend to their relationship with Guadalupe and create mutuality with the divine in the face of Christian, patriarchal rule. In identifying agency, theorists need to credit women with these types of action.

Reciprocal relationships do not end with Guadalupe, but extend to the Mexican-American community. Rodriguez believes that men and women build upon this relationship and relate to one another in mutual ways, truly creating community.

(Guadalupe's) image is a testimony that, although we may live in a world where we may not exercise control and are marginalized, the individual knows that he or she is called to a different way of relating, one in which we are sisters and brothers, and everyone is valued and has a place. (Rodriguez 134)

As a symbol shared by the Mexican-American community, Guadalupe builds a cooperative spirit among the oppressed and reshapes relationships among each other.

What does this have to do with the body? As an olive-skinned, feminine image, Guadalupe appeals to oppressed men and women who share her experience. Men and women identify with Guadalupe because she is the reflection of their own bodies. Guadalupe's female form enables them to build mutual relationships with her. Take, for example, an exchange between Edyth and Rodriguez:

Author: Why were you drawn to Our Lady of Guadalupe?

Edyth: Because she was Mexican and I'm Mexican.

Author: Anything else?

Edyth: She is a woman.

Author: What does that mean? Why is that important?

Edyth: Because I'm a woman.

Author: So you relate to her?

Edyth: Yeah, I think she feels, as a mother, she feels the things that I feel.
(Rodriguez 121-122)

Edyth finds in Guadalupe's image, a reflection of her experience. As a Mexican mother, Edyth relates to Guadalupe through a bodily connection.

Because she does not reign on high but rather interacts with the community as an intercessor to God, Mexican-American men and women become invested in a mutual exchange.

The way the women in this sample speak about Our Lady of Guadalupe is experiential, profound, affective, and reciprocal. This reciprocal exchange takes the form of the women coming to Our Lady of Guadalupe with their concerns (marriage, children, health, problems, comfort, etc.) and Our Lady of Guadalupe responding. (Rodriguez 135).

Whether or not she fulfills their wishes, Guadalupe acts within the community at all times, building unity and identity based on a mutual relationship to the divine.

On the other hand, Brasher presents only hierarchical relationships within her religious communities. Because her analysis is based upon belief and doctrine, Brasher does not envision alternate ways women relate among themselves and to the Lord. Doctrinal belief establishes the order between God, men, and women. As the creator, God maintains strict guidelines for interaction between humans and the Lord.

In religious traditions adherents generally do not consider themselves constructors of the sacred. Instead, they understand themselves as being constructed by it. By prescribing religious experiences in individualistic terms, Bay Chapel and Mount Olive's emphasis on relationship-based faith enhances this nonreflective proclivity among their attendees (Brasher 117).

In stressing an individual's personal relationship with the divine, based upon rigid church doctrine, Brasher envisions only masculine, hierarchical encounters with authority and control. She cannot imagine the ways women may relate to men, the Lord, and each other differently because she bases her assessment on religious ideology rather than the every day practice and bodily encounters between women and others.

That does not mean that the women of Bay Chapel and Mount Olive do not forge unique relationships with the Lord. Take for example Vicky who claims that her relationship with the Lord is predominately emotional. "It's emotional for me. It's like being with someone that you are totally, totally in love with and receiving that love back from them" (Brasher 108). For Brasher, these intense relationships with the Lord are proof that women are like men, not distinguishable from them. Brasher views the emphasis on personal relationships within fundamentalism as the great equalizer, anyone may establish a relationship with the Lord. However, because an emphasis on personal relationships hides the ways marginalized groups respond to domination, she is unable to make these connections. Brasher merely stresses the importance of personal relationships with the Lord, rather than identify ways women may connect to the lord affectively through a bodily response to the holy.

Another consequence of Brasher's emphasis on belief is that she overlooks women's roles in encounters between them and the sacred. Because Brasher's analysis is based upon established doctrine, she does not image ways women react to ideology in order to resist confinement. This colors her analysis of fundamentalist women; according to Brasher, women do not create their religious experience but rather are created by it.

Unlike the reflected relationship between Guadalupe and her congregation, this "nonreflective proclivity" turns religious experience into a one-way street. God acts; it is as simple as that. There is no mutuality and no recognition between two entities; instead, orders get communicated from above and enforced from below.

According to Brasher, the Lord constructs religious experience; humans do not. Although Brasher is describing the religious circumstances of fundamentalist women, rather than prescribing this condition, she limits her analysis of fundamentalist women by not allowing alternatives to this hierarchy to emerge. Because she focuses exclusively on belief, Brasher finds only the reflection of hierarchical relationships within fundamentalism. Brasher provides two examples of this ordering, in worship services and sermons. She claims that the exclusive authority of men within fundamentalist communities reflects the Lord's order in worship because only men may lead official services. Second, Brasher believes that sermons reinforce hierarchical relationships among men and women. She claims the dominance of male authority on the pulpit affects women's religious experience in two ways: it grants men sole authority and marginalizes women's experience (Brasher 115-116).

Although these surely are the effects of male authority within fundamentalism, Brasher's tale is problematic because she does not allow women to react. She envisions only hierarchical, prescribed relationships to the Lord. Limiting women to only hierarchical relationships is problematic in an inquiry into women's agency because it denies the ways women interact with one another in order to create their own religious experiences that are outside of hierarchical, masculine control. Women are not oppressed by what men say but by embedded cultural actions. Similarly, women are not freed by new ideas, even the thought of conversion, but by resistance to those embedded cultural patterns that oppress them. Because Brasher focuses exclusively upon fundamentalist belief, she is not able to identify the ways in which women act in opposition to the edicts

of the fundamentalist church. Brasher does not conceive of the ways women may utilize the space of the Bible study in order to create mutual relationships with the divine and community among one another.

Once again, in "Feminist Theory and Religious Practice," Mary Jo Neitz outlines the importance of mutuality amongst congregants. Neitz envisions mutuality in a reevaluation of the mother-daughter relationship. As a model for community with the divine, the mother-daughter relationship is mutual, communal, and embodied. Neitz claims that a feminist alternative for a model of religious experience needs to celebrate women's bonds in order to illuminate women's action. "(R)eligious ritual...sees the body as integral to spiritual growth, a tool for the spiritual path, rather than something which stands in the way of spiritual development and must be spurned" (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 528). By attending to women's embodied religious experience researchers may create moments wherein women respond to patriarchal control in order to establish communal, mutual relationships with each other, men, and the divine.

Brasher's account relies on an emphasis on beliefs and disembodied encounters with others; yet, there is room within her analysis to imagine mutuality among women. There is a sense that the women of her study are attempting to forge relationships outside of the powerful hierarchical negotiations of the family and church. In these instances, women reach out to other women, free from male interference. Judith, a member at Bay Chapel claims,

My sole purpose in going to a woman's ministry was that there wouldn't be men there. I felt very safe personally, because there would be other women. It had

nothing to do with their age, their experiences, or anything else other than that they were women. (Brasher 137)

It may be that rather than escapism, the all-female enclaves offer women opportunities to forge relationships with others built upon mutuality. However, Brasher bypasses this interpretation altogether. By insisting on belief-based analysis, she does not take into account the ways women may react to fundamentalist ideology and attempt to avert hierarchical relationships amongst themselves.

Conclusion: Consequences of the Absence of the Body in Rational Choice Theory

Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated the ways the body influences women's religious experience. The body orients women in their world, is the primary mechanism from which they act, and enables them to forge relationships between themselves and the divine. However, the body is most decidedly missing from rational choice analyses. Disembodied accounts of religious experience blind researchers to the ways the body is utilized by women as a staging point from which to react to patriarchal control. The absence of the body is problematic for several reasons.

Because it does not challenge the existent mind/body dichotomy within Christianity, rational choice theory solidifies gendered patriarchal distinctions. The traditional Christian interpretation of the female body aligns it with sin and evil. Women must overcome their bodies to attain spiritual purity and in doing so renounce sin. Without a doubt, scholars need to incorporate positive portrayals of the female body within religious studies in order to free up such associations. Unfortunately, researchers cannot detect the body when utilizing rational choice theory. Because rational choice

stresses a disembodied autonomous will, free to choose only when uninhibited and totally limitless, the body is inevitably absent from rational choice accounts of experience.

Instead, researchers need to recognize the body in religious experience in order to allow their female subjects to challenge restrictions on femininity. Rodriguez illustrates the ways women embrace seemingly tyrannical and oppressive religious institutions like Catholicism in order to undermine ideology that stresses feminine passivity and submission. The Mexican-American women of Rodriguez's study utilize Guadalupe as a catalyst for Catholic conversion in order to transform notions of femininity from humility and submission to female power, maternal authority, and unconditional love. On the other hand, Brasher cements notions of feminine passivity by overlooking the positive effects of embodiment and reducing fundamentalist conversion to an idealized choice.

Further, by disregarding the body, rational choice theory conceals rather than reveals women's action. Rational choice theory inherently focuses on belief more than ritual. Due to the fact that rational choice theorists emphasize belief, they inadvertently reinforce patriarchal doctrine. All analysis executed from a rational choice perspective will reflect religious ideology rather than religious practice and everyday deeds of worshippers. As long as doctrine portrays women as helpless, women will appear vulnerable to rational choice theorists.

Uncritically reinforcing religious doctrine is problematic in two ways: first, it disguises the ways women act to dispute patriarchal control. When rational choice theorists like Brasher, emphasize religious doctrine rather than practice, they conceal the alternate ways fundamentalist women resist patriarchal ideology. Brasher does not

attribute deeds to the women who negotiate crisis, but solely to the Lord. In doing so, she conceals women's action. Because Brasher uncritically reflects patriarchal ideology she is not able to credit women with accomplishments. On the other hand, because Rodriguez writes the body into her account of women's religious experience, she is able to identify the ways in which women transform the symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Without the body in her analysis, Rodriguez would not be able to detect women's dissent or distinguish the ways women transform Guadalupe into an empowering female symbol.

Second, because rational choice theory reproduces religious doctrine, it disguises the ways women oppose patriarchal control through mutual relationships with each other and the divine. Rational choice theory does not allow researchers to identify relationships that do not reflect patriarchal and hierarchical arrangements. Because Rodriguez discerns the body within her analysis, she allows mutual relationships among Mexican-American women and Guadalupe to emerge. Distinguishing reciprocal relationships within religious experience allows Rodriguez to detect yet another way in which women react and oppose patriarchal control. Because Brasher's rational choice analysis is based upon belief and institutionalized doctrine, she cannot envision the alternative ways women forge connections among themselves and with the Lord. By limiting vehicles by which women react to issues in their lives to cognitive vehicles *only*, Brasher strengthens patriarchal control and restricts agency.

Writing the body into religious experience is an important step for uncovering women's agency. Scholarly awareness of the role of the body in religious experience not only destabilizes Christian gendered distinctions that align femininity with emotion,

irrationality, and passivity, but also allows researchers to identify sites of women's resistance by recognizing the ways women react to patriarchal control. In order to uncover agency researchers need to credit women with action and allow them to transform ideologies that would otherwise oppress them. Because rational choice discounts the body in religious studies and focuses exclusively on belief, researchers who employ it bypass key vehicles for uncovering women's agency.

CHAPTER 5

CULTURE AND THE EMBEDDEDNESS OF RELIGION

Throughout chapters three and four, I have focused on a series of components that contribute to identity. Gender and embodiment affect female experience. Similarly, larger sociological organizations also impact experience. Culture situates meaning and informs the self. In many ways culture cannot be clearly distinguished from the subjects within it. It is an organizing framework that discerns relationships to others, the self, and power.

A large cultural framework is apparent throughout Rodriguez's text. She firmly situates Mexican-American group experience within history, political climate, and time. Her analysis of women's experience recognizes the ways religion is embedded within culture. However, Brasher overlooks culture entirely. In much the same way as she ignores the body, Brasher does not address culture. She does not articulate the interconnection between religion and the cultural framework within which it emerges. Any glimpse into American culture she may have provided is removed from her tale by her emphasis on rational choice. Brasher erases the effects of culture on fundamentalist women's lives by firmly associating religious decision-making with cognitive choice and personal relationships with the Lord.

Of course, to critique Brasher's disregard of culture reflects overall criticisms of rational choice theory. Several critics of the theory note that rational choice does not recognize the cultural embeddedness of religion (Bruce, Risman and Ferree, and Zarkofski). Because rational choice relies on personal accounts of belief and action, it

does not make room for the impact of cultural preferences, laws, and practices. This is especially problematic for researchers of religion. As Steve Bruce claims in his text, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory*, when researchers do not take larger social structures into account, their results are trivial because they create a distorted view of religious behavior.

Critics also note that rational choice misconstrues institutional action as personal choice. Because rational choice attributes all action to the individual level of behavior, it reduces institutional acts such as racism or consumerism to personal choice. Therefore, rational choice theory recognizes only voluntary action (Zarkofski). Action appears to be elective because rational choice theorists do not take into account institutional motivators. Emphasizing individual rather than group behavior is problematic because not all action is defined by choice: action often emerges from cultural practice.

In addition to these objections by critics, I find the absence of culture within rational choice analyses particularly provocative for several reasons. When describing women's religious experience, rational choice portrays "woman" as a monolithic group by solidifying identity. Rational choice theory also objectifies others by mainstreaming a white, patriarchal perspective. Finally, it neglects the marginalized by not generating room for their narratives. Because of these shortcomings, I find that rational choice theory does not allow for women's agency because it prohibits tales of women's resistance.

Viewing Women at the Margins of Culture

In her chapter entitled, "Feminist Theory and Religious Experience," Mary Jo Neitz lays out her feminist alternatives to describing women's religious experience. One of her suggestions is to allow the reevaluation of women's bonds and heritage. Neitz believes that in order to reorient religious inquiry, researchers must uncover places of empowerment for women. This requires that they develop a bottom-up approach that builds off of women's experience. In order to envision women's space within religion at all, researchers need to leave the center of religion and inquire, instead, at the margins. In doing so, researchers do more than simply "add women and stir;" instead, they produce a woman-centered discourse.

Putting women at the center of analysis produces more than a critique of oppressive social systems; it also can transform our concepts and theories for thinking about the social order. (Neitz "Feminist Theory" 521)

When researchers search at the margins for women's experience they uncover women's tales but also expose a system of oppression.

Within her text, Rodriguez is able to focus on women's experience at the margins. She reclaims the image of Guadalupe for the indigenous Nahautl people of Mexico. As an example of religious syncretism, Guadalupe resonates in the Catholic world as well as for the Nahautl. Rodriguez illustrates the ways differing interpretations of Our Lady of Guadalupe may emerge from different perspectives. Catholic Europeans certainly view Guadalupe as another in a long line of Marian sightings around the world. However, unlike other Marian images, Our Lady of Guadalupe emerged in a clash of cultures and

within a population that spoke several languages; therefore, her story was not immediately closed and canonized. An open climate for explanation allowed several versions and diverse interpretations of Our Lady of Guadalupe to emerge.

Because she is divine through both Spanish and Nahuatl eyes, Rodriguez claims that the Nahuatl interpret Guadalupe through ancient Aztec symbols.

Given the context of this apparition, the indigenous people would make strong connections between Our Lady of Guadalupe and their own divinity and religious system. It was very natural for the Aztecs to associate Guadalupe with Tonantzin since both were virgin mothers of gods and both appear at the same place. (Rodriguez 41)

Guadalupe's symbolism, image, and story resonate with the indigenous people.

Dominating and oppressed groups use the complementary symbolism of Guadalupe equally; while the Spanish seek to colonize Mexico with her image, Guadalupe continues to be used to maintain visibility of marginalized traditions. We can see these distinctive activities in contemporary Mexican-American women's use of Guadalupe as both a Catholic symbol and a reflection of Mexican-American oppression. Guadalupe is known within Catholicism as a champion of the oppressed. Her reputation is built upon the symbolism of the Virgin Mary but also materializes from her association with Mexican oppression.

Guadalupe is utilized by oppressors and oppressed alike. Because she resonates in both the European and Nahuatl world, her symbolism is complex. She is employed both to oppress and empower Mexican-American women. As a symbol of European colonization, Guadalupe reminds women of their painful history. At the same time,

Guadalupe is a uniquely Nahuatl symbol: she reflects back olive skin and her dress incorporates Nahuatl signs such as the cosmos. Yet, without reading cultural context and historical significance into the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we would never uncover the Mexican-American interpretation of the sign. In this way, Rodriguez's attention to the cultural framework of religion attends to the dynamics of power that enables those in control to create and mandate tales. If we did not uncover the oppressed's tales within history, we would hear only the colonizers' voices. Instead, Rodriguez reconstructs history in order to retell tales of resistance.

Because marginalized groups' stories are dependent upon a careful reading of them by persons attuned to their cultural and historical significance, researchers who do not read culture, history, and political power into their narratives gravitate toward the center rather than the margins. Researchers interested in women, the quintessential marginalized group, must surely take these organizing factors into account. Unfortunately, Brasher does not. Throughout her text, she ignores the cultural significance of women's religious actions and erases history. She looks at the economic categories: marital status, income and education, but denies each woman an historical and cultural context for religious behavior.

However, histories and cultural markers surface in Brasher's individual interviews. As Brasher collects information from her subjects, she runs into resistance from the women categorizing race and ethnicity. Whereas economic class and education elicit simple responses and yes/no answers, persons' racial and ethnic identification imply a cultural heritage. When Brasher asked the women of Bay Chapel and Mount Olive

their race and ethnicity, she ran into unexpected responses. These responses combine cultural, historical, geographic, and personal information:

When I asked women about their racial/ethnic identity in open-ended interviews, the answers they gave were frustratingly messy to categorize. For instance, Andrea, a young, dark-brown-skinned Bay Chapel adherent, described her racial/ethnic heritage as 'southern,' 'Georgian' and 'military.' This type of eclectic response was not unique to Andrea. My interviewees consistently described their racial/ethnic characteristics in an almost perverse fusion of cultural, social, and geographic terms. (Brasher 16-17)

Although Brasher does not make room for culture, her subjects notice the interconnection between race, ethnicity, geography, society, and history. Their "perverse" responses signify the importance of cultural frameworks like a Southern, military family.

Rather than respond to and analyze the cultural influences identified by the fundamentalist women, Brasher refuses to pursue women's tales at the margins; instead, she presents a normative narrative. Brasher reiterates vague demographics that constitute life characteristics and downplays difference.

The life characteristics of the Bay Chapel and Mount Olive women I interviewed differ, but not dramatically enough to raise major questions about whether qualitatively different social dynamics are at work in each. (Brasher 16)

Because she suppresses the variety of cultural characteristics that combine to create identity, she denies diversity. She portrays women as a monolithic group by compressing their difference into statistics. Brasher claims that most women are married, in child-raising years, and have completed college. Her reliance on normative categories of women, whitewashes women's experience. She distills the difference inherent in women's lives and reports instead on a condensed tale of religious experience.

Because Brasher does not situate women's tales within place and time, she does not accurately reflect women's experience. Rather than refocus her inquiry at the margins, she reiterates the normative version of fundamentalist experience. In Rodriguez's terms, Brasher tells the tale of the Spanish conquerors rather than the Nahuatl people. She is not able to access the alternate readings of religious symbols because she does not notice the cultural backdrop within which religion is situated. In effect, Brasher neglects the marginalized and makes no room for their narratives to emerge. Rodriguez, on the other hand, gives voice to the oppressed and looks for women's narratives at the margins of culture. Because she situates the tale of Our Lady of Guadalupe within place and time, she is able to uncover the experiences of women rather than reflect back the normative narrative created by religious institutions.

Subject/Object Relationship and Culture

Uncovering the oppressed's narratives takes a particular approach to research on the part of the researcher. In "Walking Between the Worlds: Permeable Boundaries, Ambiguous Identities," Neitz approaches the tenuous subject/object relationships that occur between researcher and religious subjects. Researchers are traditionally encouraged to remain distant from their objects of inquiry in order to write from a perspective outside of the group. The most successful scholarship articulates the experience of another without succumbing to that same experience. Neitz notes that this relationship is one of power and creates opportunities for scholars to "other." Rather than remain distant from objects of inquiry, Neitz suggests researchers enter into community

with others in order to break down the boundaries between researcher (subject) and other (object).

In doing research in religious groups, multiple identities are brought into play: religious identities, sexual identities, gender identities, racial identities, class identities, political identities and occupational identities. Complex and shifting, each of these is available to be mobilized in entering into a situation and in constructing and co-constructing the meanings that unfold there. (Neitz "Walking" 35)

Rather than interrogate the "other," Neitz believes that religious study is more like (or needs to be more like) the meeting of two worlds. Both the researcher and her subjects are informed by multiple identities, which shift in conversation with others and alone.

Neitz calls this strategy "walking between the worlds" ("Walking" 35). When studying marginalized groups, scholars need to be conscious of the ways in which they both uncover and replicate privilege. Although they are making claims about privilege in women's experience and therefore are uncovering it, they also are tapping into the subjective privilege of an academic observer. Like many before, researchers may "other" their religious subjects. To counter this, Neitz suggests that researchers relinquish privilege in order to counter the authority granted to researchers.

Studying a marginal group raises a question about taking sides. The disciplinary disciplinarians are really asking, why would you betray your own kind: Why would you give up the privileges of being on the side of the powerful? They assume that in becoming a sociologist, I, as a non-Protestant, a woman researcher, experience the world and can deploy privileged authority in the same way that they do. (Neitz "Walking" 42)

Here, Neitz brings up the issue of switching sides. She suggests that researchers become a "cult member" of group that they study (Neitz "Walking").

In order to engage with subjects rather than objectify them, Neitz suggests that researchers note the power relationships between researcher and subject and also write from their location. Writing in the social position of the researcher is a central characteristic of feminist research. In religious research, identifying positions of power is especially important. The goal of religious research should be to create multiple voices rather than reiterate only one. Because of this, Neitz aims

to write a text that is multivocal. To make small claims for my big ideas. To write in the language of possibility not necessity. This is key for me now: to write in the language of possibility. (Neitz "Walking" 44)

Writing in the language of possibility requires that researchers give up their subjective and privileged position in order to allow new possibilities to emerge. Revealing power relationships within research enables a plurality of voices to emerge, not only the voices of others, but also multiple voices of the researcher's self.

From Neitz's analysis, we can see that multiple identities need to be brought into play when describing religious life. This requires multiple perspectives of the objects of religious inquiry as well as a multi-vocal retelling by researchers. Because Rodriguez utilizes a psychosocial framework to uncover cultural embeddedness of religion, she allows for multiple identities of her female subjects. Her human subjects and symbolic subject, Our Lady of Guadalupe, are allowed to cross borders and engage in complex relationships to power, acculturation, oppression, and resistance.

These four points all are attested to by the following example from Rodriguez. Carolina, one of Rodriguez's subjects, describes the relationship between these forces.

When asked if she felt Mexican-American women were satisfied with being mothers, she responds,

They feel satisfied in any area they might want to accomplish as long as they're appreciated and told, you're doing good, I appreciate you, it's important what you're doing, you're a person, you're a human being, I care about you. It doesn't matter what area they're in, as long as they know what they're doing, and that's what they want to be doing and someone in their life is appreciating what they are doing, being, their kids, husband, or family. Out of their own choosing. (Rodriguez 118)

Although a cultural emphasis on mothering has traditionally kept Mexican-American women from economic and emotional resources, Carolina and other women develop strategies to overcome the self-defeating alienation of domination. They strive to redefine motherhood. Carolina uses Guadalupe's symbolism to respond to power relationships that would otherwise confine her by actively remaking the role of mother.

Rodriguez notes that traditional studies of Mexican-American women offer only two frameworks to understand their experience. As a doubly oppressed group, Mexican-American women are viewed as victims of patriarchy or of colonization. Because of this, they are often portrayed by scholars as submissive and as persons who bear the brunt of Mexican-American men's sense of inferiority. Similarly, Our Lady of Guadalupe is often viewed within two distinct frameworks, she either represents the deceptive mistress of Cortez, Malinche, or the passive Blessed Virgin Mary. In Mexican custom, Malinche is the treacherous women responsible for the fall of the Mexican people.

Other alternative readings of Guadalupe stress her submissive qualities. She is viewed, like other Marian images, as a model for appropriate feminine behavior. Unlike the aggressive Malinche, the Virgin Mary symbolizes feminine passivity, especially in

relationship to men. These two oppositional perspectives, virgin and whore, appear to limit interpretations of Our Lady of Guadalupe. However, because Rodriguez delves into time and place, she reclaims Guadalupe, Malinche, Mary, and Mexican-American women. Instead of emphasizing their submissive roles, Rodriguez is able to break the victimization narratives associated with Mexican-American women in order to allow multiple, complex identities to emerge.

Take, for example, Julia, who envisions Guadalupe as a complex blend of passion, pride, passivity, and humility.

Our Lady of Guadalupe represents to me everything we as a people should strive to be: strong yet humble, warm and compassionate, yet courageous enough to stand up for what we believe in no matter how tense the pressure. Above all, obedient to God's will. (Rodriguez 140)

Julia embraces the contradictory nature of Guadalupe in order to refashion her perception of womanhood. To an outsider, Julia's emphasis on passivity contradicts her assertion that she stands up for her beliefs. Although they live within patriarchal and rigid familial systems, Rodriguez believes that Mexican-American women create new understandings of womanhood because of their cultural crisis. They rely on the complex image of Guadalupe to forge new relationships with God, men, and each other.

Unlike Rodriguez, Brasher creates a monolithic portrait of women's experience in a singular response to American culture. Rather than create multiple, complex, and ambiguous relationships between religious women and their secular lives, Brasher envisions their religious conversions as a release from American culture, she views religious behavior in opposition to culture. In fact, she claims cultural motivations like "disheveled gender expectations, fragmented marriages, economic instability, and

widespread cultural malaise” each influence women to convert to fundamentalism (Brasher 9). Brasher views these cultural influences in opposition to fundamentalist beliefs and practices. Instead, women convert to fundamentalism in an effort to alleviate these cultural effects. Brasher restricts her tale of female agency because she does not allow complex identities to emerge. She unifies female experience by establishing a singular, rather than multi-vocal response to consumerism.

Throughout her text, Brasher utilizes the term “consumer” in alternate ways. Due to her reliance on rational choice theory, Brasher frequently describes fundamentalist women as consumers of faith. It is an economic metaphor for the perceived rewards of faith and religious commitment. This should not be confused with American consumerism. Brasher draws the line between American culture and her fundamentalist population. She claims that, unlike American culture, conversion to fundamentalism offers women an alternative form of empowerment that does not involve purchasing a product.

The religious outlook of the conversion narratives of Bay Chapel and Mount Olive women is in decided contrast to American middle-class consumerism, which depicts conversion of the self as something that occurs through purchasing a product. (Brasher 55)

Brasher firmly places fundamentalism in opposition to American consumer culture. She does not make room for complex responses to American culture because rational choice theory dictates that she ignore culture entirely.

However, opportunities to envision the effects of American consumerism appear throughout Brasher's text. She reports that fundamentalist gender distinctions are conveyed through purchasing books, CDs, and tapes that underline fundamentalist belief.

One of the simplest ways Bay Chapel and Mount Olive spread their message of God's order for gender and the family is the books, tapes, CDs, and videos in the sizable bookstore each church maintains. (Brasher 131-32).

These remnants of American culture stand in stark contrast to Brasher's assertion that fundamentalists do not purchase actualization. Certainly, consumerism is alive and well within the sizable fundamentalist stores located at each church site. However, Brasher does not allow multi-vocal narratives to emerge. Rather than insist on a complex relationship to consumerism among her research subjects, Brasher emphasizes their singular response to it. According to Brasher, fundamentalist women oppose culture rather than respond to it in a complex way. In doing so, Brasher cements her privileged position as academic observer and does not allow multiple voices to emerge.

Personal Experience in Belief and Group Experience in Culture

Complex, multi-vocal analyses are important in order to breakdown the privileged position of researcher. However, emphasizing diverse tales does not imply that narratives of women's religious experience need to solely emphasize the personal. Researchers must also integrate women's group experience into narratives; only then may interconnections be made and personal experience aligned with larger sociological themes. Although these two moves appear to be counterproductive, together they allow for an analysis of cultural implications of behavior.

In "Gender and Culture: Challenges to the Sociology of Religion," Neitz suggests that theorists and researchers of the sociology of religion need to situate individual women's experience within a broader understanding of group identity. Although moves to connect groups of women have often been criticized as essentialist, Neitz notes that her call for constitutive narratives does not imply essentializing and fixing experience; rather, constitutive narratives abolish the myth of the autonomous individual by connecting sociological and institutional powers that create those experiences. Locating larger organizations of power leads to an emergence of relational narratives in religious discourse.

One benefit to articulating women's group awareness is that it leads marginalized groups to actualization. Collective action requires the recognition of cultural frameworks that organize and create women's experience. Although visions of the autonomous individual may be more appealing for researchers interested in uncovering agency, emphasizing group experience allows resistance to emerge. Within Neitz's relational view, agency is envisioned as mutual and collective. Agency is expressed in cooperation with others, rather than in individual isolation. Neitz claims, "once we look at selves as relational rather than essential, then structure and agency can be imagined as mutually constitutive rather than as opposed" ("Gender and Culture" 397). When researchers emphasize individual autonomy, agency is achieved in opposition to cultural factors that attempt to limit potential. Oppositional agency stresses isolation and individual action. On the other hand, Neitz's relational agency allows groups of women to access agency with one another by recognizing the ways culture and institutions of power structure their

lives. Rather than position freedom in opposition to culture, theorists may imagine freedom in reaction to cultural limitations.

In identifying the ways in which Mexican-American women utilize and connect to the image, symbol, and story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Rodriguez finds that women's individual experience is grounded in non-individual components, history and culture. A psychosocial framework allows Rodriguez to forge connections between the historical, psychological, and theological meanings of Guadalupe for her believers. Because she utilizes a psychosocial framework, Rodriguez is able to identify the material and political motivations for religious behavior as well as the intra-psychic aspects of religion: the emotions, fears, aspirations, and yearnings that affect Mexican-American women's experience.

Throughout her analysis of women's religious experience, Rodriguez shapes Mexican-American perspectives by noting history, culture, time, and place. To her, religion is part of a Mexican-American assumptive worldview that is deeply impacted by history. Although history may affect personal experience it primarily impacts groups:

historical events have an effect whether we are conscious of them or not. The impact of systematic marginalization on Mexican-American women is that they find themselves in positions of no control over those institutions which influences them. (Rodriguez 126)

Mexican-American experience is shaped by the crisis between U. S. and Mexican cultures. It is not personal history, but group history that has led to marginalization and powerlessness. Because Mexican-American women as a group do not have access to

institutionalized power, it colors their experience. Rodriguez believes that history is therefore, an important influence on group identity.

According to Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe has historical, sociological, anthropological, theological, and psychological significance to Mexican-American women. Historically, Guadalupe is an event, a clash of Aztec and Spanish cultures. Sociologically and anthropologically she forms and informs Mexican-American identity. One believer claims, "I love her and she is part of my culture; she is our madre...I feel proud that we have the Virgin of Guadalupe on our side...having her the way she is...her color" (Rodriguez 194). Theologically Guadalupe is the mother of God. And psychologically, Mexican-American women identify with Guadalupe in order to utilize her image to symbolically reshape their own lives. For example, one such believer states, "I have her like a torch in my life. It keeps me going. It keeps me active...I see that she's always been there for me...I know that by...touching the frame of where she's at I feel what strength comes to me" (Rodriguez 196). Rodriguez believes that above all, Mexican-American women use Guadalupe as a resource (129). Because their group experience has left Mexican-American women triply oppressed and without access to institutional power, Guadalupe enables women to reshape their experience.

As a coping mechanism with which to survive dominant culture, Mexican-American women's relationships to Guadalupe are not rational. Rodriguez believes that their relationship, forged in opposition to scientific and empirical American culture, emphasizes non-rational and non-scientific experience. "This faith experience of Our Lady of Guadalupe stands in opposition to the scientific, objective, and rational

assumptive world of the dominant culture” (Rodriguez 139). Instead, relationships with Guadalupe emerge from a socio-historical and affective response to her image. Guadalupe not only reflects back the image of Mexican-American women, but also allows these women to actively reshape their own reflections.

On the other hand, Brasher stresses individual women’s relationships with the Lord. Rather than recognize the ways these relationships are interrelated to culture and history, Brasher views only the personal components of conversion. She claims that women do not note socio-cultural factors in their conversion narratives. Instead, conversion is inherently personal. “For Mount Olive and Bay Chapel women, the nonacknowledgement of structural factors in their conversion was a structural factor of conversion tales. In the conversion story, the personal was personal” (Brasher 38). Rather than stress the ways culture structures women’s relationships to the divine, Brasher claims that women view religion as a personal connection that allows them to overcome social barriers. Instead of reading sociological connections between culture and religion, Brasher envisions the two only in opposition which can be seen clearly in her account of conversion.

It was not until after the salvation event, the ‘Aha!’ moment within the conversion process, that cultural or societal factors were ever acknowledged in the story. When they were, they were portrayed as a chaos that originated from the disconnection of culture and society from God’s order for the world. (Brasher 38).

Brasher distinguishes between the “worldly,” pre-conversion lives of her fundamentalist and their transformation into “Godly Women.” Brasher envisions her fundamentalist

women as either secular *or* religious. This is problematic because it emphasizes the myth of the autonomous individual actor and masks agency. Because women's actions are only viewed in opposition to cultural limitations, Brasher is not able to respond to the ways women transform these forces in their lives.

Whereas Rodriguez is able to envision transformation among multiple horizons, cultural, historical, and psychological, Brasher limits her analysis by pinpointing only psychological motivations for religious behavior. Brasher claims that the central characteristic for conversion among Mount Olive and Bay Chapel women is crisis. Interestingly, Rodriguez also establishes crisis as the central characteristic of women. However, Rodriguez ties women's crisis to the cultural and historical factors that unite Mexican-American women into a singular group. The women of Rodriguez's study are united in a response to the crisis of acculturation, the collision of Mexican and American cultures. "What we are witnessing is the struggle and emergence of a new understanding of themselves as Mexican-American women in U.S. society" (Rodriguez 125).

Brasher, on the other hand, emphasizes only personal crisis, thus masking cultural institutions at work in women's lives. Although Brasher notes statistics among her congregants like, "Of the twenty-five personal-crisis stories, eighteen had marital crisis as their central theme, ranging from impending to actual separation and divorce" (Brasher 44), she does not tie these experiences to larger institutions that structure women's experience. Brasher identifies two motivating themes for fundamentalist conversion, "personal life crisis" (42) and "growing awareness of personal emptiness" (43). Rather than draw connections between divorce, economic isolation, and powerlessness, Brasher

stresses the independent nature of women's crises. "Although dominant themes were present in conversion stories, each narrative remained stubbornly unique, a spiritual journey embedded in the particularities of an individual life" (Brasher 37). In doing so, Brasher masks the cultural and historical institutions that create women's experience.

Brasher's emphasis on individualism contrasts with Rodriguez's accent on group experience. Rather than stress individual belief, Rodriguez believes that individual religious experience is grounded in non-individual components, shared history, and culture. Rodriguez connects history with culture in order to position women within place and time. Situating experience within history allows researchers to address not only the constraints on women's freedom, but also to envision resistance to these constraints:

To understand the effect of any religious experience on a person, we must understand how this experience is perceived, is valued, and how it motivates behavior – in other words, how it fits into that person's assumptive world and psychosocial reality. (Rodriguez 49)

Unlike Brasher's emphasis on individual relationships with the Lord, Rodriguez's notion of shared experience point out connections between power and behavior, oppression and action. Rather than stress the individual motivations for religious behavior, Rodriguez claims that to understand anything about people at all, including religious aspects of their lives, we must first encounter their psychosocial worldview.

Conclusion: Culture, Resistance, and Agency

Outlining the cultural forces at work in women's lives is a necessary step to identifying agency. Because Rodriguez situates women's group experience within

culture, she provides a framework with which to uncover women's resistance. Without addressing culture, researchers like Brasher limit women's response to the forces that confine them in their everyday lives. As I have outlined, women's agency may only be articulated through frameworks that also take into account the limitations to women's freedom. Women are not inherently free; rather, they are continually restricted by patriarchal culture. This does not mean that women's agency does not exist; instead, researchers need to investigate women's agency within tales of women's resistance to the forces that shape that experience. Researchers will uncover women's agency only by constructing tales of resistance. These tales regard the forces that limit women's experience at the same time as they identify ways women react to control.

As many critics have noted, rational choice theory does not incorporate culture into analysis (Bruce and Zafirovski). This is problematic in itself; yet, I have identified further cause for caution when employing the theory. When used to express women's religious experience, rational choice makes it impossible for researchers to identify tales of women's resistance.

To begin, rational choice theory creates normative tales of women's experience rather than reveals women's narratives at the margins of culture. Because rational choice does not take into account group influences of behavior such as political climate, access to power, and cultural history, it recreates tales that resonate with the personally privileged. It denies the history of women's struggle to assert political equality and emerge as equal subjects within culture and academic scholarship. Rather than reconstruct women's tales within a history of oppression and cultural framework of

inequality, rational choice presupposes that all women are free, individual actors.

Portraying women as autonomous individuals is problematic because it conceals women's resistance. Rather than expose the ways women engage agency through resistance, rational choice obscures the ways women react within a cultural framework.

Next, rational choice solidifies the tenuous subject/object relationship in academic research. Researchers, like Brasher, who employ rational choice, do not reveal multiple voices within their religious subjects or themselves. Instead, they present only a single voice with which to analyze religious behavior, that of the rational choice theorist. This obscures the complexity of ways women respond to their cultural horizons. Reducing women's diversity is problematic because it portrays women as a monolithic group by not envisioning multiple responses to their lived situations. Because rational choice theory simplifies women's religious behavior, it denies the ways groups of women react in complex ways to their cultural limitations. Without concern for the complexity of women's actions and reactions to culture, researchers may not identify women's resistance.

Finally, rational choice theory denies group heritage by focusing exclusively on the individual level of human behavior. It reduces women's experience to "personal crisis." Rather than draw connections between institutional power and life, rational choice masks large-scale organizations of power by emphasizing individual experience. Researchers like Brasher who employ such frameworks continue to objectify their subjects of inquiry by neglecting marginalized experience. Without recognizing the cultural constraints on women's freedom, researchers may not identify the ways women

react to those constraints. Unfortunately, researchers who do not account for culture in women's lives disguise rather than uncover tales of women's resistance.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AND A PROTESTANT BIAS IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

In the contemporary world, political, economic, and social institutions continue to marginalize and systematically oppress women. Currently, women in the United States are underrepresented in government, consistently earn fewer wages than men, and continue to be socialized into believing they are the “weaker sex.” Patriarchal traditions devalue women’s roles and privilege male authority. Religious denominations, such as Christian fundamentalism and Roman Catholicism, add to women’s subjugation. Each of these traditions alleges male superiority and authority; yet paradoxically, women continue to adopt these restrictive traditions as their own.

The question feminist and religious studies scholars continue to ask is: why do women partake in oppressive religious practices? One response is that women find empowerment within such traditions. Both Brasher and Rodriguez’s research support such a conclusion. They detail the ways women embrace seemingly restrictive religious traditions in order to build community and act collectively. Although throughout this thesis, I have held up Rodriguez’s research of Mexican-American women as an instructive alternative to Brasher’s account of fundamentalist women, I have never discounted Brasher’s reports of her subjects’ empowerment. In fact, I agree with her contention that the all-female enclaves at Bay Chapel and Mount Olive provide women with opportunities for collective influence and personal fulfillment. Instead, throughout

this thesis, I have identified problems with utilizing rational choice theory in scholarly efforts to uncover and fully appreciate women's agency within religious experience.

Problems with the Rational Choice Approach to Religious Studies

I have illuminated the problems with the rational choice approach most clearly while writing about three prominent features of women's experience: gender, the body, and culture. I have claimed that gender needs to be thoroughly discussed in religious studies research in terms of a relationship to power. Often gender is approached by scholars of religion as a superficial distinction between men and women's religious activities, behaviors, and responsibilities. Although the differences between men and women's lives is often a consequence of gender, scholars interested in women's experience need to delve into the negotiations of power at the heart of gender. Ultimately, when scholars uncover relationships of power *within* religion, they notice that *religion* legitimates control over others.

Rational choice theory is inadequate in articulating power relationships within religion because it conceals the role of patriarchal institutions in limiting women's access to power. Undoubtedly, the single most restrictive feature of the rational choice approach is its emphasis on the personal level of experience. Because rational choice theory focuses exclusively on individual experience, it does not link personal incapacity with organizational oppression. Stressing personal experience is especially problematic for scholars documenting the effects of gender in women's lives. It reinforces women's subordination by strengthening hierarchical relationships between men and women. Rather than challenge women's group subjugation, rational choice theory conceals the

conditions that create shared, group experience for women, rendering them ignorant of those forces that confine them, and allowing hierarchical relationships to exist unchecked within religious research.

Because rational choice theory is uncritical of organizational and institutional power, those theorists who utilize it limit women's responses to the forces that shape and influence their lives. Without naming the forces that confine women's action and attempt to limit their ability, scholars restrict the ways women react, challenge, and resist patriarchal influence. Overlooking resistance is a devastating flaw of rational choice theory. For scholars interested in outlining women's capacity to influence their surroundings, speak their mind, and actualize their potential, identifying resistance is the key to uncovering women's agency. Brasher's text is powerfully illustrative of the difficulties of identifying and naming women's power while utilizing the rational choice approach. She claims, "The power of women is an invisible organizational principle, uncommented upon but allowed for in everyday life and work" (Brasher 87). By utilizing rational choice, Brasher is unable to explain female power, at best women's power remains invisible. Because rational choice theory overlooks existing oppression in women's lives, it neglects to notice potential sites of female agency through resistance.

Similarly, when scholars write the body into religious research they make way for agency to emerge. By focusing on the practices of women, rather than their beliefs alone, researchers may more astutely credit women with action. Embodied accounts reveal the ways women orient themselves in the world and build communities with others.

Disembodied accounts of religious experience blind researchers to the ways the body is utilized by women as a staging point from which to react to patriarchal control.

Because rational choice theory builds its conclusions exclusively upon religious belief, the body is inadvertently absent from its accounts of experience. The absence of the body is problematic for several reasons. It solidifies gendered mind/body distinctions within Christianity. By not challenging Christian tenants that align femininity with the body, sin, and death, rational choice theory cements these associations. Further, by disregarding the body, rational choice theory conceals rather than reveals women's action. It takes note of the choices women make rather than the deeds they accomplish.

That rational choice theory prefers to focus on religious belief rather than on religious acts is not without consequences. Scholars who utilize theories such as rational choice, basing women's religious behavior on ideology rather than on practice, uncritically reinforce religious doctrine. The cursory bolstering of religious doctrine is problematic because it disguises ways women react to and dispute patriarchal control in deeds as well as in the creation and maintenance of mutual relationships with each other and the divine. Although rational choice theorists may note female control within religious organizations, they neglect to appreciate the ways that an emphasis on ideology blinds scholars to alternate ways women act within religious organizations. Brasher notes that "given the prevailing norms of male authority that permeate the Christian fundamentalist movement, it is practically impossible for stories about women's power to become part of fundamentalist congregation's public history" (Brasher 88). Rational choice theorists are unable to identify women's resistance because they bring largely

uncritical eyes to religious doctrines that position authority and power with men and align femininity with passivity, helplessness, and sin. By limiting vehicles by which women react to issues in their lives to cognitive vehicles *only*, rational choice theorists strengthen patriarchal control and restrict women's agency. Instead, researchers need to recognize the body in religious experience in order to allow their female subjects to challenge restrictions on femininity and freedom.

These two flaws in the rational choice approach, the exclusive emphasis on belief and the sole reliance on personal experience in religious research, become most apparent in the neglect of the cultural context of religion by rational choice theory. I have claimed in this thesis that scholars interested in observing women's religious agency need to delve into place, time, and history, in order to allow complex narratives of women's experience to emerge. If it does not address the cultural significance of religious experience, religious research shrouds the multiple meanings of religious symbols and performances. When scholars overlook culture, they limit their interpretations of women's behavior to mainstream, patriarchal, and normative readings of women's deeds. Without recognizing the cultural context of women's religious experience scholars continue to transport women's narratives to the margins of the cultural production of knowledge. Instead, researchers need to create alternative readings of women's lives in order to identify the ways women react to constraint.

Implications of this Research for Religious Studies

These limitations to rational choice theory reflect larger criticisms of a Protestant bias in religious studies. As religious scholars note, an emphasis on Protestantism within

religious research not only dilutes the diversity of Protestant religious experiences reported within religious studies, but also begins to mandate what gets interpreted as religious. The ultimate problem with stressing Protestantism within the academy is the tie between authoritative power and academic legitimacy. Scholars like Orsi, Wills, Smith, and Neitz suggest that the naming and detailing of Protestant practices by religious researchers produces ties to subjectivity and authenticity for mainstream Protestants and distances those on the outskirts of acceptable religious expression from authority, security, and power.

An astute observer of my comparison of Brasher and Rodriguez's texts will note that although these two scholars are certainly different, they are alike in their tendency toward univocal conclusions. While Brasher attributes women's participation in fundamentalism to a carefully selected choice, Rodriguez ascribes women's involvement in relationships with Guadalupe entirely to cultural heritage. One views religious involvement solely as a function of individual choice, the other encapsulates no choice within cultural practices. What can be made of these discrepancies? Does religion only operate on extremes? Or, which scholar is the more astute observer of religious life? Is religion a choice, or is religiosity an almost unconscious expression of a cultural environment?

Debates about whether Rodriguez or Brasher is more perceptive about women's religious experience and concerns about their univocality illuminate questions about religious studies itself. From this thesis, there emerge three implications for the future of research in religious studies. We gain insights into the operations of religion as a

normative category, the ways religion functions within the academia and personal lives, and the strategies scholars may employ to destabilize the subject/object relationship in religious research.

The disparities between Brasher and Rodriguez's emphasis on and disregard of choice, grants us insights into the power of religion to legitimate action and authenticate belief. The type of behavior each scholar examines does differ. Brasher inspects belief while Rodriguez observes ritual; yet, each scholar arrives at similarly univocal conclusions. Whatever the focus of their research, each scholar believes religious experience amounts to pure choice (belief) or cultural heritage (ritual). Rather than claim one woman's observation of religious experience is more valid than the other, we must inspect the role of religious research in authenticating those experiences. Because fundamentalist belief has already been legitimated through religious doctrine and academic observation, scholars like Brasher may ascribe meaning and importance to belief. Similarly, because Catholic devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe has previously been authenticated through established ritualistic behavior as well as religious research, scholars like Rodriguez may attribute significance to roles, rituals, and relationships embedded within those acts.

Is religion a choice? Perhaps religious belief is an identity forged from group experience, as Rodriguez believes, *and* is also a personal choice, as Brasher claims. Looking back on my comparison of Brasher and Rodriguez's texts we see that each scholar's conclusion results from their initial emphasis on religion as primarily a matter of belief or of ritual. If anything, my comparison of Brasher and Rodriguez grants insight

into the way religion operates as a normative category. Once belief has been authenticated and legitimized through religious research, scholars may emphasize belief within their research of religious traditions that stress ideology. Similarly, once acts are substantiated through sufficient scholarly emphasis, ritual will be the focus of religious inquiry within traditions that give emphasis to ritual. Instead of making claims about the certainty of the ways religion operates -- wholly a matter of choice or entirely a consequence of cultural influences -- my comparison of Brasher and Rodriguez's texts illuminates that what we take religion to be is very much the result of specific practices in the academy that legitimate some beliefs and actions and render others invisible or inconsequential. Unfortunately, while religious studies authorizes and empowers some religious traditions, it also marginalizes and "others" others.

Another implication for the field of religious studies that emerges from this thesis is the connection I draw between religion and power. Rational choice theory reflects a Protestant bias in religious studies. The theory concentrates on institutionalized, belief-based doctrine. It does not situate the body and religious ritual within academic analysis, and rational choice does not link a scholarly emphasis on rationality with systematic oppression of the traditions of marginalized groups. Therefore, all of the criticisms scholars have raised from a Protestant bias in religious studies apply to the utilization of rational choice theory.

Problematically for the field, overlooking important organizational influences like gender prohibits rational choice theorists from articulating other relationships to power such as race, class, and sexuality. Scholars need to note ties between institutional power

and religion. Once they notice the connections between race, class, sexuality, gender, *and* religion, scholars will find that religion, too, is a relationship to power. Religion authorizes experience through an appeal to normative categories and establishes control over religious subjects. Institutional power is evident in a Protestant bias in religious studies. Scholars authorize religious acts through an emphasis on indoctrinated belief. As a continuation of frameworks like race, class, and gender, in an analysis of religion, we must learn to be conscious of the overlapping privileges of power. That scholars of religion identify power is especially important for their inquiries into the religious experience of oppressed groups. That they articulate social, cultural, and historical relationships to power is essential, not only because they will more accurately describe marginalized experiences, but also and more importantly, because they will appreciate the emergence of narratives that situate agency within resistance to structural forces.

These insights into religious studies provide a fuller picture of religious life, and present opportunities for the transformation of the field. Once scholars have identified the power of religion to authenticate experience, they may be inclined also to break down the subject/object relationship within religious studies, become aware of the authorization of religious experience through academic research, and reorient the Protestant bias in religious studies by conceding the importance of popular religion. Scholars must be made aware of the tie between institutional power and academic studies. While these connections are troubling, the field of religious studies need not dismiss the importance of religious investigation altogether. Religious inquiries need not merely oppress but may also be able to open up alternative avenues by which underrepresented religious

groups may establish subjectivity and create awareness within mainstream academy through study.

Finally, I offer strategies for scholars to destabilize the subject/object relationship in religious research and ultimately transform the field of religious studies. Focusing on practices rather than beliefs creates distinguishable ties between institutional religion and power. Once ritual is reestablished within religious studies as a central characteristic of religious experience, scholars may be inclined to pursue popular rather than institutional religion. Accenting embodied action gives scholars the vocabulary to articulate the experiences of the unknown, the oppressed and marginalized, those without institutional power. Articulating the body in religious experience allows scholars not only to break into the realm of popular religion, but also to identify alternate ways women and men react to ideology and domination. Embodied accounts make resistance visible. Scholars may formulate reactions *to* religious ideology and institutional control rather than uncritically reinforce oppression through an exclusive emphasis on religious belief.

Likewise, when scholars attend to the cultural nuances of symbolism and ritual, they allow the oppressed's tales to surface. Unfortunately, theories of religious behavior that highlight belief recreate normative tales of women's experience. They do not refocus research at the margins of culture but rather, reflect mainstream ideology. The constant cycle of the reproduction of institutional religious belief denies the ways oppressed groups have historically struggled to attain political power and personal redemption. Often times, oppressed groups embrace seemingly hostile ideological

foundations in order to transform their lives. Only when scholars investigate the cultural context of religious experience may they detect subversion.

Discovering defiance is only one of the results of identifying a cultural context to religious experience. Understanding the complex effects of culture may eventually lead researchers to develop multi-vocal analysis (Orsi *Between* and Neitz "Walking").

Writing multiple voices into research not only allows diversity to emerge amongst research subjects, but also, collapses the powerful subject/object relationship in academic research. The ultimate achievement of addressing the components of power, like gender, embodiment, and culture in religious research is the potential for transformation of the field of religious studies. Once power and oppression have been traced historically through marginalized religious experience, scholars note that the authoritative status of the academic observer is itself a relationship to power.

Transforming religious studies into a field oriented toward multi-vocal analysis will be no simple task. Both Orsi and Neitz suggest that scholars will need to learn to breakdown the normative hierarchy of religious idioms in order to confront the powers of religious inquiry to propagate difference (Orsi *Between* and Neitz "Walking"). Instead, they propose that scholars enter into "otherness," an in-betweenness that combines the scholar's self and other.

Both Brasher and Rodriguez provide glimpses into entering into otherness. Brasher proclaims herself a feminist early on in her text; yet, in seeming opposition to feminism, she attempts to champion her fundamentalist women's cause by taking their belief seriously and devoting the entirety of her text to uncovering female power within

fundamentalism. However, she also emphasizes the distance between herself and her subjects, insisting on her role as observer and distinguishing her informed analysis from the experiences of the women she interviews. On the other hand, Rodriguez reveals that during the time she spent with Mexican-American women, she became a devotee of Guadalupe. Rodriguez comes close to achieving otherness by relinquishing her status as observer and sharing in community with her subjects. However, because Rodriguez firmly attributes Mexican-American women's religious experience solely to their cultural heritage, she diminishes the personal connection she has forged through Guadalupe with her research subjects, downplaying the personal, spiritual, and cultural connection she has made between herself and her Catholic subjects. We are left to believe that her shared cultural heritage links Rodriguez to these Mexican-American women rather than that she has surrendered authority as Orsi and Neitz suggest.

In order to surrender authority, scholars need to forge a connection between themselves and their religious subjects. Religious researchers attuned to the negotiations of power in cultural devices such as gender, accustomed to regarding and revealing the body within religious experience, and familiar with the nuances of culture may be more inclined to enter into otherness and relinquish power. Entering into otherness is transformative. It has the potential to alter both the academic observer and the discipline of religious studies. Once scholars learn to take risks by allowing the boundaries between self and other to dissipate, a Protestant bias in religious studies may also dissolve. A pivotal first step in the transformation of the discipline of religious studies is critically gauging the consequences of theories of inquiry like rational choice.

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